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ON HIS METTLE;

OR,

The Marbleville Mystery.

BY FRED THORPE.



In an instant Tom threw off his coat and plunged into the stream to the rescue.

ON HIS METTLE;

OR,

THE MARBLEVILLE MYSTERY.

By FRED THORPE.

CHAPTER I.

A WISE RESOLUTION.

"By jingo, you've lost again!"

"That makes twenty dollars you owe Fred."

"Say, Tom, isn't it about time you stopped?"

Tom Ordway arose to his feet, exclaiming:

"Yes, I think it is."

The scene was the clubroom of the Marbleville Dare-devils.

Do not picture to yourself, reader, an elegantly-furnished apartment, blazing with light and supplied with the luxuries of a metropolitan clubroom. The meeting-place of the Marbleville Dare-devils was only a loft in Squire Apthorpe's barn, and the so-called "Dare-devils" were half a dozen youths, of ages ranging from fourteen to seventeen, who had the reputation of being the worst boys in the village.

And they had fairly earned it, too, the ringleader of the club, Fred Apthorpe, the squire's son, having done all in his power to prove himself a worthy scion of an unworthy sire, and his companion "dare-devils" having done all in their power to emulate his example.

Squire Apthorpe prided himself on being a "gentleman of the old school." By this he meant, judging from his life, that he was "tipsy" most of the time, and that he had not the slightest regard for the feelings of any one except himself.

Fred had had no difficulty in gaining his father's consent to the use of the loft as a clubroom by the Dare-devils, and there they used to meet twice a week and plan mischief of all sorts.

On the present occasion they had been playing poker all the evening, and now, at eleven o'clock, Tom Ordway found himself a loser to the amount of twenty dollars.

As he arose with flushed, excited face to take his leave, any one would have been obliged to confess that he was by far the best looking boy in the room.

His was a frank, handsome, manly face, though his garments were of coarser and poorer material than those of any of his companions.

He was about sixteen years old, and tall and well-formed for his age.

In striking contrast to him was the handsomely-dressed Fred Apthorpe, whose countenance gave evidence of a low cunning and shrewdness beyond his

years, and whose lips wore an unpleasant sneer as, in reply to Tom's remark, he said:

"Hold on! Haven't you forgotten something?"

"Eh?"

"I say haven't you forgotten something? You owe me just twenty dollars."

"I see; you want your money."

"Well, I should smile."

"You needn't be afraid that you won't get it, Fred Apthorpe. I'll hand it to you the first thing in the morning."

"That don't go."

"What do you mean?" demanded Tom, excitedly.

"I mean that I don't believe you ever had twenty dollars in your life."

"If you don't, then how do you expect to get your money?"

"I expect," said Apthorpe, in low, deliberate tones, "to make this town too hot to hold you if you don't raise it for me in double-quick time."

For a few moments Tom stood gazing steadfastly into his companion's eyes, all the contempt he felt plainly depicted upon his face.

Finally he said:

"Well, you've shown yourself in your true colors, Fred Apthorpe. As it happens, I have got the money."

"Hand it over, then."

"I haven't got it with me; it is in my room at home. Can't you wait until morning?"

"No, I can't," said the squire's son, decidedly. "I want it now."

"Very good, you shall have it if you'll take the trouble to come home with me and get it."

"I'll take the trouble."

"Come on, then."

"Hold on, Tom," interposed Apthorpe, as the boy started for the door. "Don't get your back up. If you'd won I wouldn't have made any fuss about paying. Come back and have a drink."

And he produced a black bottle from a closet in one corner of the loft.

"Not another drop of the stuff for me," said Tom. "I've done with it, and with you after to-night."

Fred uttered a prolonged whistle.

"Turned good, eh? Seems to have a queer effect on you to lose a few dollars. Am I to understand that you are no longer a Dare-devil?"

"That's just the idea I mean to convey. Now come along if you want your money to-night."

And he began the descent of the stairs that led to the lower floor of the barn.

"Come along, fellows," said Apthorpe, winking at his companions.

Two minutes later the half dozen boys were hurrying down the road that led to Tom's home, our hero being some distance in advance of the others.

The boy lived with his grandmother, old Eunice Ordway, in a rickety, tumble-down old building in the outskirts of the village.

All Marbleville believed Mrs. Ordway to be a miser, the amount of her wealth being variously estimated at from one to five hundred thousand dollars.

Some of the more superstitious of the villagers pronounced her a witch, and it must be confessed that her appearance conformed with the popular idea of a being of this sort.

With her tall, gaunt figure, her long, flowing white locks and her wild, piercing eyes, she might have stood for Sir Walter Scott when he drew his picture of Meg Merrilies.

It was said that Tom's mother was dead, and various stories were told about the whereabouts of his father, the one generally accepted being that he was a fugitive from justice.

But nothing was positively known, for Tom was very reticent in speaking of his parents, and his grandmother was just as uncommunicative.

"Say Fred," whispered one of the boys to the squire's son, "do you believe Tom has got the money?"

"Hanged if I know," was the response. "If he hasn't I'll make him sorry for leading me this march."

"You will?"

"Yes, I will, Bill Alden."

"Guess you've forgotten the thrashing he gave you last winter. Better not try that again, Fred."

"That's all right," said Apthorpe. "I haven't forgotten it—you can depend on that. If I have trouble with him to-night, I shall expect you fellows to stand by me. Remember, he's not one of us any longer."

"We'll stand by you, Fred," said Ike Jarvis, one of Apthorpe's toadies. "But do you believe he's really going to leave us?"

"I don't care whether he does or not," growled the leader of the Dare-devils.

"But he's the brains of the club."

"He is, is he?" said Apthorpe, fiercely; "well, I'll furnish the brains for it after this."

The discussion was brought to an end by the arrival of the party at old Mrs. Ordway's hovel.

Never had the dilapidated old structure looked more dismal than it did to-night, and almost unconsciously the boys huddled together, half expecting to see the old witch dart out and spring upon them.

"Wait here," whispered Tom, turning to his companions. "I shall have to climb in at my window, as usual. Don't make any noise. I'll be back in a minute with the money."

With these words he hurried to the rear of the house and disappeared.

"I'll bet he's given you the slip, Fred," grinned Ike Jarvis.

"If he has, it won't be healthy for him."

"I don't believe he's done anything of the sort," said Bill Alden. "Tom's white, and he'll bring the money."

"But where can he have got twenty dollars?" queried Jarvis.

"I'll tell you what I think," said Fred, "if you want to know."

"What?"

"It's dollars to peanuts that he's going to swipe it from the old woman's money-chest."

"Oh, he wouldn't dare do that," said Jarvis.

"Wouldn't he?" sneered Apthorpe. "Well, he'd rather get the old woman down on him than me, and don't you forget it."

"Hush! here he comes."

"Here's your money, Fred Apthorpe," said Tom, emerging from the darkness. "Now go."

"Hold on; I'll count it first. Five, ten, fifteen, twenty. Yes, that's correct. Say, where did you get this, anyhow, Tom?"

"Never mind where I got it," was the angry response.

"All right—just as you say. Well, have you thought better of leaving us?"

"No. I want nothing more to do with you or any of your crowd."

"Good enough. You hear that, fellows? Now, then, Ordway, you've got the Dare-devils down on you, and you know what that means. Come on, fellows."

Uttering a series of wild whoops that would have done credit to a band of Comanches, the Dare-devils started on their homeward journey.

"They'll wake up grandmother," reflected the boy. "No, she's awake now—there's a light in her room. I shall hear about this in the morning."

He retraced his steps to his own room, a miserably furnished apartment, dimly lighted by a tallow candle.

Seating himself on the edge of the bed, he began reviewing the events of the evening.

"Well," he mused, "I'm glad I'm rid of that gang, anyway. They'd have been the ruin of me if I'd remained one of them. I can't help thinking that I'm made of somewhat better stuff than those fellows, even if most of them have got rich parents. If I had a fair chance I might amount to more than any of them. "But"—and a bitter smile curved his lip—"what chance have I got?"

He arose and began pacing the floor.

"As long as I remain in this place I shall never amount to anything. Grandmother is rich, but she hardly gives me the necessities of life or allows them for herself. She won't send me to the academy, where I might get an education and friends who would help me along. Every respectable person in the place despises us both, no one will associate with me except fellows like Fred Apthorpe and his gang, and by being seen so much with them, I've made my reputation so bad that I'll never be able to recover it in this town.

"Why need I remain here? Why not go out into the world and fight for a living as millions of others have done? I could not be worse off than I am here.

"I'll do it—I'll go this very night. But hold on. I'll first give my grandmother one more chance to do me justice. She's up now, I'll go to her at once.

"What was it that Mr. Travis said to me yesterday when I told him my story? 'A boy in your position owes it to himself to be on his mettle every moment.' Well, I'm on my mettle now and I'm going to stay there."

CHAPTER II.

TOM MAKES TWO FRIENDS.

We must now explain how it happens that Tom, who seldom had any money at all in his possession, was supplied with funds sufficient to enable him to pay his gambling debt of twenty dollars to Fred Apthorpe.

On the day previous to the events related in our first chapter, while fishing in Milton's creek, a small stream about four miles from Marbleville, he had been startled by a cry of terror in a female voice.

Looking up he saw, in the middle of the stream, an overturned boat, with a man clinging to it, and a girl just in the act of disappearing beneath the surface of the water.

So engrossed in his sport had our hero been that he had not observed the approach of the boat.

In an instant he had thrown off his coat and plunged into the stream. He was an expert swimmer, and a few powerful strokes brought him to the scene of the disaster.

"'Elp, 'elp!" shouted the man who was clinging to the boat, and whom Tom now perceived to be quite youthful and very "dudish" looking. "Get me ashore, me good fellah, and I'll give ye a pun note—I will, on me honah."

"I guess you'll have to wait a while," said Tom, as he seized the girl, who had at this instant arisen for the second time.

"Oh, ba Jove, I cahn't wait, doncherknow," bawled the youth. "'Elp, 'elp!"

But by this time our hero was striking out for the shore, which in a few minutes he reached nearly exhausted, for the girl, with her water-soaked garments, was not a light weight.

An elderly gentleman whose face gave evidence of extreme agitation, came hurrying to meet him.

"You have saved my daughter's life," he said, in a voice choked with emotion, as he relieved Tom of his precious burden.

Our hero, who had a constitutional dislike of "scenes," only replied:

"That's all right, sir. And now I guess I'd better go back for the gentleman."

"Oh, leave him where he is," said the old man, in a tone of disgust. "If he should happen to sink it wouldn't be any loss to this country, and I don't believe her majesty would complain much either. But see! there goes some one with a boat in his direction. He's all right now."

In a few moments the dude had been dragged into a boat by a fisherman who had chanced to be passing. He was half-frightened to death, but had sustained no physical injury.

"I ought not to have permitted my daughter to go out in a boat with him," said the old gentleman, excitedly. "It was his unskilful management that cap-sized it."

"I think that it would be well for you to take the young lady home, sir," interposed Tom, noticing that she was shivering from head to foot.

"Her home is too far from here," said the anxious father; "but perhaps you can tell me where she can find a temporary place of shelter near this place."

"Yes," said Tom, "there is a little hotel not five minutes' walk from here. But perhaps I had better get a carriage for the lady."

"No—no," said the girl, speaking for the first time. "I can walk, and would much prefer to do so. Oh, sir, how can I ever thank you for what you have done?"

And she bent a look upon the boy's face which caused him to blush furiously.

He stammered out some sort of a reply—he was never afterward able to tell exactly what it was, but he always felt sure that it was something ridiculous on account of the mischievous smile that appeared upon the young lady's face in spite of the peril from which she had so recently been rescued and the discomfort of her present position.

They started for the hotel, the young girl walking between her two companions and leaning upon her father's right arm and Tom's left.

They conversed but little during the walk; but our hero found an opportunity to shyly study the faces of his companions, and he came to the conclusion that the gentleman was one of the most distinguished-looking old men and his daughter the prettiest girl, without exception, he had ever seen.

When the young lady had been consigned to the tender mercies of the landlady of the little roadside inn, her father and Tom, who had been furnished with a dry suit of clothes, adjourned to the parlor.

"Now," said the old gentleman, "I'll give you my name and ask for yours, my young friend."

He handed Tom a card upon which the boy read the name:

"HORACE TRAVIS."

"I haven't any card," said our hero, "but my name is Thomas Ordway."

The old man's face changed.

"You live in Marbleville?" he questioned.

"Yes, sir."

"You are the grandson of old Mrs. Ordway?"

"I am, sir," and Tom felt his face crimsoning.

There was a rather awkward pause; then Mr. Travis said:

"Well, my boy, I am a man who don't believe in beating about the bush. To tell truth, I've heard of you, and I've been told that you are one of the worst boys in Marbleville."

This was rather embarrassing for Tom, and his feelings were plainly depicted on his face. But the old gentleman quickly added:

"But I can assure you that I don't believe a word of it. I profess to know something of physiognomy, and your face tells me that you have been slandered. I do not think that you have a bad nature, but I believe that you have been unwise in your selection of associates. Now, under the circumstances, I am naturally interested in you, and would like to know more of you. Come, tell me your story, and I may be able to aid you with advice if nothing more."

Such encouraging and friendly words had never been spoken to Tom before, and it is no wonder that the boy was more confidential with his new-found friend than he had ever been with any one before.

In a few words he told the story of his life. Mr. Travis listened attentively, and when he had finished gave him a good deal of advice, using the words which we have overheard Tom quote in his soliloquy:

"A boy in your position owes it to himself to be on his mettle every moment."

Tom appreciated the truth of this statement; he knew that success would be harder for him than it

would be for another who had not a bad reputation to live down.

"But advice is cheap, as the old saying tells us," continued Mr. Travis, "and I must give you some more substantial token of my appreciation."

As he spoke he thrust his hand into his pocket.

"Excuse me, sir," began Tom, "but I could not accept—"

But the old gentleman interrupted him with:

"Nonsense! Don't let a false sense of delicacy stand in the way of your own interests, and deprive me of the pleasure of proving my gratitude. Take this," and he thrust a roll of bills into the boy's hand. "Put it in your pocket. That's it! You'll find it'll come handy, I don't doubt. I'm not trying to pay you for my daughter's life—if I were I should give you my whole fortune; I am only endeavoring to help a youth who I am sure needs just such assistance as this."

"Thank you very much, sir," said Tom.

"I shall hope to see you again. I will write my business address on the back of my card. If you ever decide to leave Marbleville, and seek your fortune in New York, come to me, and I may be able to help you. Ah, here comes Fitz Roy. He is the son of my agent in London, and he recently came to this country to embark in business, and show us how they do things on the other side. I gave him a place in my office, and he already thinks he knows more about my business than I do myself."

The young Englishman, whom Tom had last seen clinging to the capsized boat, came walking up in the most approved London fashion, carrying a cane nearly as large as himself, which he had succeeded in saving. He was very wet and very angry.

"Didn't ye 'ear me call for 'elp, boy?" he demanded of Tom.

"I did," replied our hero, quietly.

"Then why didn't ye come to me rescue?"

"I had something of more importance to attend to just then," said Tom.

"I might 'ave drowned hif hit 'adn't been for that cove that 'appened along. I gev 'im 'arf-a-crown, which you might 'ave 'ad hif you'd done has I told ye. This'll be a lesson to ye, I fahncy."

"Yes, it'll be a terrible lesson, Fitz Roy," laughed Mr. Travis. "But I didn't suppose you valued your life so highly."

"I don't quite catch your meaning, doncherknow," said Fitz Roy, who, like many Englishmen, could not see the point of a joke until he had studied over it an hour or two. "But I hassure you, sir, that this couldn't 'ave 'appened in the old kentry. The water—"

"Oh, I suppose the water here is a good deal wetter than it is there," interrupted Mr. Travis, impatiently. "But you don't seem to think it worth while to ask anything about my daughter."

"I beg your pardon, my deah sir. Did Miss Travis get very wet?"

"Bah!" and the old gentleman turned away. "You'd better change your clothes, Fitz Roy, or you'll catch cold. Come, my young friend"—addressing Tom—"I'll walk down the road a piece with you."

And paying no further attention to the discomfited and bewildered Englishman the old gentleman walked out, followed by our hero.

When they had parted, half an hour later, Tom drew the roll of bills from his pocket and counted them.

There were five fives—twenty-five dollars in all—a far larger sum than the boy had ever had in his possession before.

"I will follow Mr. Travis' advice," he said to himself, "for I know that it is good. I'll take good care of this money, for it may be the foundation of a fortune."

Alas! for the frailty of human nature.

Tom had an appointment with the Dare-devils the next evening, and in spite of his good resolutions, he decided that he would keep it.

He told himself that he could gradually break off his connection with Fred Aphorpe and his "gang," but that it would not be well to do it too abruptly, and that he ought to attend this particular meeting.

He went, the cards were brought out, and the result we have seen.

It is no wonder that when he realized what he had done, and found his little fortune reduced four-fifths, he felt that some decisive step must be taken.

In pursuance of his resolution to speak to his grandmother before leaving the house, he arose, and passing through the narrow passage which connected his room with hers, knocked upon her door.

There was no response; but he heard a noise in the room, and he said in a low tone:

"Grandmother, I want to speak with you."

"What is it that you want?" came from the other side of the door, and Tom could not help noticing that the voice sounded harsh, strange and unnatural.

CHAPTER III.

"IT—WAS—MY—"

"I want to see you about something very important," said Tom.

"It's too late," was the reply; "wait until to-morrow."

But Tom was in no mood for waiting.

"I must see you now," he said.

"Well, you can't. Tell me what you want."

"I won't detain you long. I want to talk about myself. I want to know how long this sort of thing is to go on."

"What sort of thing?"

"You have plenty of money, but you make me live like a beggar. I want you to provide me with a different home and send me to the academy, or else give me a chance to start in business."

"I shall not do it."

"Do you mean that?"

"You'll find that I do."

Tom's blood was up.

"If you stick to that resolution," he said, "I shall leave your house forever."

"Go, then."

"You tell me to do so? you would rather have me go than do me justice?"

"Go, I tell you."

"When?"

"Now—at once. I never want to see your face again."

"I'll take you at your word, grandmother. I am going."

There was no response.

Tom returned to his own room and made up a small bundle of clothing. Then, after one last glance around the room that had been his for so many long years, he vaulted out of the window and hurried down the lonely road.

The light was still in his grandmother's window. He hesitated a moment, half inclined to take one more look at the old woman toward whom, notwithstanding her cruelty to him, he had a spark of natural affection.

"No," he said, "what's the use? By stopping I may miss the train and I can't afford to do that."

And he hurried on.

Had he but glanced through the window into his grandmother's room much of the suffering that he was afterward compelled to undergo might have been spared him!

Tom reached the railway station about five minutes before the arrival of the midnight train for New York.

"Hello, Tom," said Ned Dalton, the station-agent, staring at our hero in surprise, "what are you doing here at this time of night?"

"I'm going to New York," replied our hero, quietly.

"Going to New York? See here, Tom!"

"Well?"

"I'll bet a five-dollar note you're running away."

Tom was silent.

"If you are," went on the agent, "I don't blame you—in fact I think it's the best thing you ever did in your life. Come, now, own up, my boy."

"Well," admitted Tom, "I am running away."

"I was sure of it. Well, see here, I don't suppose you're overburdened with money."

"No, I'm not."

"Well, here's a pass for New York. I got it for myself the other day, but didn't have to use it, and and you're welcome to it."

Tom thanked his companion warmly for this unexpected favor. The price of a ticket to New York would have made quite a hole in his five-dollar bill.

"What'll your grandmother say when she finds you're gone?"

"She knows it."

"Knows it?"

"Yes; she told me to go."

"Oh, then, you're not exactly running away. But here's your train. Good-by, Tom, and good luck go with you!"

Just as the train was about to start a tall man with a heavy black beard and a slouch hat, pulled over his eyes, leaped upon the platform of the car which Tom had entered. A moment later he had seated himself by our hero's side.

During the ride Tom addressed one or two remarks to him, but his replies were so short and gruff that the boy soon ceased to attempt to engage him in conversation.

For some moments after the train's departure, Ned Dalton, the station-agent, stood looking after it. He was a simple-minded, good-hearted fellow, and there was a suspicious moisture in his eyes as he murmured:

"Poor Tom! he's never had much luck here; may he do better in the big city. Well, I mustn't stand here staring after the express all night; they'll be looking for me at home."

He locked up the little station, and, lantern in hand, started for home.

On his way he was obliged to pass Mrs. Ordway's hut. The light was still burning in the old woman's room.

"Now, what is she up for at this hour of the night?" he muttered. "Counting her money, I'll bet. I'll see if I can't get a glimpse of the old hag."

He crept noiselessly up to the window, and looked through a broken slat in one of the shutters.

The next moment he started back with a cry of horror.

"My God! what does this mean?"

He had seen the old woman lying upon the floor, bound hand and foot, with a gag thrust in her mouth.

For a few moments he stood as if rooted to the spot. Then, observing that the door stood wide open, he rushed into the hovel.

As he entered the room where Mrs. Ordway lay the old woman's eyes met his in mute appeal, and she uttered an inarticulate cry.

Dalton bent over and cut the ropes that bound her, and having removed the gag, helped the woman to rise to her feet.

She staggered, and would have fallen to the floor again had not her companion caught her in his arms.

He assisted her to a chair, then he asked:

"What does all this mean, Mrs. Ordway?"

In reply, a look of blank despair upon her face, she pointed to an iron-bound chest that stood open in one corner of the room.

Dalton understood the gesture.

"You have been robbed?" he questioned.

"Yes," she replied, hoarsely, "robbed of all—all!"

"Money?"

"Yes; thousands upon thousands, and— Oh, I guttural accents. "And he, the unnatural wretch, "Keep cool, Mrs. Ordway, the money will doubtless be recovered."

"It must be, it shall be!" cried the old woman, excitedly. "Every bill—every single one was marked."

"Marked? How?"

"With a small red cross on the upper left-hand corner of the back."

"Then no doubt they can be identified in that way. But don't get excited, Mrs. Ordway," for it was evident that the woman was laboring under great agitation.

She was breathing very heavily, her face was ghastly white, and her lips were blue.

"They must be identified," she exclaimed, in hoarse, guttural accents. "And he, the unnatural wretch, shall be punished."

"To whom do you refer?" asked Dalton, curiously.

But Mrs. Ordway did not seem to hear him. She was rocking to and fro in her chair, her eyes fixed upon the chest in the corner.

"It's a pity you drove Tom away just at this time," said Dalton at last.

"I did not drive him away," cried the old woman with energy. "Who says that I did?—tell me that!"

"Tom himself. He informed me that you told him to go."

"I did not. I— Ah!"

And pressing her hand to her heart, Mrs. Ordway sank from her chair to the floor.

"My God!" muttered her companion, gazing in alarm at her pallid face, "she's dying!"

"Yes," gasped the woman, overhearing the whispered exclamation, "I am dying. I know it, I feel it!"

"Tell me, quickly," cried Dalton, "who it was that robbed you."

"Yes, yes," said the hag, "you shall know. See that justice is done, that the wretch to whom the ties of blood were as nothing, is punished. The robber—was—my—"

She did not finish the sentence, but fell back with a low gasp.

Dalton bent over her.

"Dead!" he exclaimed aloud, "but not until she had revealed the secret. The person who robbed her, and who is responsible for her death is her grandson, Tom Ordway!"

Let us now return to Tom.

The train reached New York just as dawn was breaking. Our hero made his way to a cheap hotel which he knew by reputation.

As he was about entering he saw the black-bearded man who had sat next him in the car, standing on the opposite curbstone.

The suspicion flashed upon him that he had been "shadowed," but he immediately dismissed the idea as absurd.

He was shown to a small but comfortable room, and in five minutes was fast asleep.

He did not awaken until nearly noon. Then he sprang out of bed, exclaiming:

"This sort of thing won't do. I must get to work."

As he was putting on his coat he felt an unusual protuberance in one of the outer pockets.

He thrust in his hand and drew out a roll of bills fastened with a rubber band.

"Money!" he fairly gasped. "How did that get into my pocket?"

He hurriedly removed the band and counted the money out on the table. There were ten ten-dollar bills.

"A hundred dollars!" he cried. "Am I dreaming?"

At this moment there came a knock upon the door.

Tom opened it, and a short, thick-set, stern-faced man brushed past him and entered the room, demanding:

"Is your name Thomas Ordway?"

"It is," replied the boy.

"Then you are my prisoner."

"Your prisoner?"

"Yes. I am a detective, and I arrest you for robbing your grandmother, Eunice Ordway."

"I am innocent," began Tom.

"Yes," sneered the officer, "this looks like it. Here are a lot of the marked bills on the table. Put on your hat and come along."

and done that which seemed to confirm the justice of the accusation.

Such a case was that of Tom Ordway. In his confusion and amazement he stood for a few moments as if rooted to the spot, his eyes fixed upon the detective's face. Then, acting upon his first impulse, he rushed to the table and attempted to gather up the money which seemed to be such strong evidence against him.

Of course this satisfied the officer—if he was not convinced in his own mind before—that his prisoner was really guilty of the robbery of which he was accused.

"None of that," he said, seizing the boy's arm. "I'll take charge of those bills."

"I—I did not steal that money," stammered our hero. "I found it in my pocket not five minutes ago!"

"Oh, you did, eh?" sneered the detective. "Well, I'm afraid that story won't hold water."

"It is true, nevertheless."

"You can tell that when you are arraigned in court—I am not your judge. But I'd advise you to think up a little more plausible yarn. The old woman was robbed, and less than an hour later you left town. When found you had a portion of the stolen money in your possession. That ought to be evidence enough to convict you."

And the officer gazed upon Tom with considerable disfavor depicted on his face.

"I am innocent," protested Tom, "and I can prove it."

"You can, eh? How?"

"By my grandmother, who, harsh and unjust though she has been, knows me too well to accuse me of such a crime."

"Well, I don't believe you will prove it by your grandmother."

"Why?"

"Because she's dead," replied the detective, with brutal frankness.

"Dead?" gasped Tom, all the color forsaking his face. "My grandmother dead!"

"Yes, she's dead—of heart-disease. The excitement of the robbery was too much for her. And you, boy, are responsible for her death."

"It is a lie!" cried Tom, in a thrilling voice.

"Is it?" sneered the officer. "Well, see if you can make the judge believe that. I don't think you can, in view of the fact that your grandmother, almost with her last breath, pronounced you guilty of the robbery."

"She said that I was guilty!" exclaimed the boy.

"Yes."

"To whom?"

"To one Dalton, a station-agent."

"I do not believe it," cried Tom. "There is, there must be some terrible mistake."

"Well, I hope you'll be able to prove that there is," said the detective. "I'm not the one to judge, as I said before; if I were I should say that you were a mighty nifty youngster, who was quite capable of committing the crime of which you are charged. But I have no more time to waste in chinning with you. I've had a breathing spell, and we must be moving on. Come along with you now."

"Where are you going to take me?" asked the boy.

"Back to Marbleville, of course," was the reply. "You'll have to stand trial in the county in which the crime was committed."

As he walked down the street in company with the

CHAPTER IV.

A FALSE WITNESS.

Sometimes the agitation and excitement of a person suddenly and unexpectedly accused of a crime of which he is entirely innocent are looked upon as evidences of guilt. And there have been many instances of persons who, under such trying circumstances, have said

detective no one would have suspected that Tom was under arrest, but our hero knew that if he made the slightest attempt to escape it would be frustrated by the officer. But he did not want to escape; to try to do so would, he thought, be construed as an admission of guilt.

He was willing, even anxious, to go back to Marbleville, and stand trial for the crime of which he was accused; but he could not help acknowledging to himself that appearances were terribly against him.

His former bad reputation, his constant association with the worst boys in the village, the unfortunate time he had chosen for his flight, the discovery of the stolen money in his room, his grandmother's alleged ante-mortem statement—all these things would weigh heavily against him.

"But I am innocent," he said to himself again and again, "and it must be made manifest. Something will happen to clear me from this dreadful charge."

Not to weary the reader with too many details, let us pass over the events of a week, and come to the day of our hero's trial, which occurred just seven days after his return.

In the meantime a new witness against Tom had made his appearance, and if his evidence were accepted it would go far toward convicting the boy of the crime. This was no other than Fred Apthorpe, the squire's son, who claimed to have been an eye-witness of the robbery, and to be able to positively identify Tom as the person who stole the money.

Our hero was appalled when he heard this, but by the advice of his lawyer, a bright young man, employed in his behalf by Mr. Travis (to whom he had written immediately after his arrest, telling him the whole story), he reserved any reply he might have to make to the accusation until the trial.

The eventful day was one of the finest of the season. The courtroom was crowded, for old Mrs. Ordway and her grandson had been known either personally or by reputation to every one for miles around.

It is unnecessary for us to give any but the main incidents of the trial—to enter into detail would be tedious for the reader and not essential to the understanding of our story.

Ned Dalton was the first witness called. He told the story of his brief interview with Mrs. Ordway and of her dying utterances in a clear, straightforward manner. Tom's lawyer declined to cross-examine him, and he was dismissed.

Then Fred Apthorpe took the stand. His face was flushed, and a triumphant smile played upon his lips, as he gazed around him.

It was evident to Tom and to the others who were in the secret that he had come there to "get square," and that he thought he had a "sure thing."

"You were with the prisoner on the night of the robbery?" began the counsel for the prosecution.

"I was."

"At what hour?"

"I left him at twenty minutes past eleven o'clock."

"State what occurred during your interview."

Apthorpe went on to give the particulars of the last meeting of the Dare-devils, and of Tom's payment of his gambling debt, just as they have been related to the reader.

"After leaving the prisoner, where did you go?" asked the lawyer.

"I went home," was the reply.

"Did you remain there?"

"No; I found that Ordway had given me only fifteen dollars instead of twenty. I was mad and I returned immediately to his house, intending to make him give me the rest of the money."

"State what occurred when you got back to Mrs. Ordway's house."

"I heard the sound of loud voices in Mrs. Ordway's room. I recognized one of the voices as Tom's. I was curious to see what was going on, and I looked through the window, which was a little way open."

"What did you see and hear?"

"Tom and his grandmother were standing in the middle of the room, and both of them appeared to be very much excited. I heard her accuse Tom of stealing money from her chest, and he acknowledged it, and said that while he was about it he'd have all there was there. He then started for the chest, which stood open in one corner of the room. The old woman placed herself in his way, but he knocked her down."

A murmur of indignation ran through the courtroom at the supposed unmanly and unnatural conduct of the prisoner. But not a muscle of Tom's face moved; he had sufficient self-control to hide his feelings, whatever they were, and bide his time.

"She tried to get up," went on Apthorpe, in the tone of one who is reciting a lesson, "but Tom snatched a rope from a shelf in the closet, which happened to be standing open, and in a couple of minutes had bound her hand and foot, just as she was found. Then he took four or five big rolls of bills from the chest and started for his own room."

"What did you do then?"

"I came away."

"Why did you not remain?"

"I did not think that it would be safe. I knew that Ordway was armed with a revolver, and I was afraid that he would shoot me if I attempted to detain him. I hid not far from the house until I saw him start down the road, and then I went home."

"Without going to the rescue of the woman whom you had seen attacked and robbed?" interposed the shrewd old judge, bending upon the face of the youth a look of evident incredulity.

"I was afraid," said Apthorpe. "I—I did not think of it."

"That will do, Mr. Apthorpe," said the counsel for the prosecution, gazing around him with an air which showed that he thought his case as good as won.

"One moment," said Tom's lawyer. "I have a few questions to ask the witness."

"I am ready to answer any question you or any one else may wish to put to me," said Apthorpe, with an impudent, defiant stare at the young lawyer.

CHAPTER V.

THE TABLES TURNED.

Fred Apthorpe had evidently learned his lesson well, and felt certain that no question that the counsel for the defence could put to him could "trip him up."

"Go right ahead, I can stand it as long as you can," was written all over his face.

"You swear," began the lawyer, "that you were an

eye-witness of the crime of which the prisoner is accused?"

"I do."

"You distinctly saw all that you have described?"

"I did."

"But if there was no light in the room in which the crime was committed how is this possible?"

"Oh," said Apthorpe, readily, "that is easily explained. The rays of the moon were streaming in through the window, and the room was as light as day."

"You are absolutely certain of this?"

"Of course I am. How could I be mistaken on such a point?"

"I don't see how you could be," returned the lawyer. "Your honor," he added, turning to the judge, "this is the story that this boy, Apthorpe, has been industriously circulating throughout the village and neighborhood for the last week for the purpose of revenging himself upon my client for some fancied wrong; and it has never occurred to any one except the youth whom he falsely accuses that at half past eleven on the night of the robbery there was no moon. It did not rise on that night until nearly two o'clock."

A whirlwind of applause shook the courtroom, despite the efforts of the officers present to preserve order. As for Fred Apthorpe, all his sang froid vanished in a moment, and he looked as though he would like to sink through the floor, as, no doubt, he would.

"This illustrates the fact," went on the lawyer, "that in nearly every piece of false evidence there is some flaw, which careful examination will reveal. Now, this boy, Apthorpe, spent a good deal of time and ingenuity in getting up this story, and it would, no doubt, have been believed if he had not overdone his work, as scoundrels of his stamp usually do in such cases, and invented this story about the moon—an entirely unnecessary thing for him to do. As a matter of fact, there was a light burning in the old woman's room at the time when he says he witnessed the robbery. The credit for discovering this mistake of the young perjurer belongs to my client. It is a point once raised by Abraham Lincoln when he was a young man, in a somewhat similar case."

The youthful lawyer, flushed with triumph, would have gone on indefinitely with his somewhat irrelevant remarks, but the judge at this point checked him, and ordered that the examination proceed.

By this time Apthorpe had partially regained his composure.

"I might have been mistaken," he stammered, "but I—"

"That will do," interrupted Tom's lawyer sternly. "I have no more questions to ask you."

The young fellow stepped down, and was going to leave the courtroom when, to his surprise, a heavy hand was laid upon his shoulder.

"There's a cloud hanging over you, young man," said the judge, grimly. "You will have to answer to the charge of perjury."

Apthorpe sank into a chair, half fainting, and the examination proceeded.

After the interrogation of a few unimportant witnesses whom Tom's counsel declined to cross-examine, the prosecution rested its case, and the first witness for the defence was called.

This was no other than the prisoner himself.

Tom told a plain, straightforward story of the events of the evening of the robbery, and it was evident that

the narrative made a profound impression upon all present.

"Are you certain that it was your grandmother who spoke to you from behind that closed door?" he was asked during the examination.

"I am not," was the reply.

"Are you not willing to swear that it was her voice?"

"No, sir."

"But you believed at the time that it was she who was speaking to you?"

"I did; though I noticed that her voice sounded harsh and peculiar. I believe now that it was the thief who spoke to me, and that he was attempting to imitate my grandmother's voice."

This created a sensation in the courtroom, second only to that which had followed the exposure of Apthorpe's villainy.

The counsel for the prosecution moved to have it stricken out, but the judge permitted it to remain.

During his examination Tom told about the black-bearded stranger who had boarded the train on the night of the robbery, and had sat next him all the way to New York, and expressed the opinion that it was he who had put the stolen bills in his pocket.

Ned Dalton was recalled to the stand, and testified to having seen the stranger referred to jump on board the train, and to having thought that his actions were somewhat suspicious.

The next witness called was one whose appearance caused a murmur of surprise to run through the room.

It was Dr. Fields, the young assistant to the venerable village physician, Dr. Middleton.

No one could imagine what possible connection he could have with the case.

"You accompanied Dr. Middleton when he went to view the body of Mrs. Ordway, did you not?" questioned the counsel for the defence.

"I did!" was the reply.

"Dr. Middleton pronounced the cause of the woman's death heart disease?"

"He did."

"Did you agree with him in that opinion?"

"I did not," answered the young doctor, firmly.

"What in your opinion was the cause of the death of Mrs. Ordway?"

The doctor had opened his mouth to reply, when the lawyer on the opposite side called out sharply:

"I object."

"The objection is sustained," said the judge promptly. "The testimony is irrelevant."

"Very well, your honor," returned Tom's counsel quietly, and Dr. Fields was dismissed.

Ike Jarvis, one of Fred Apthorpe's boon companions, a "Dare-devil," and a member of the party that accompanied Tom to his home to get the twenty dollars on the night of the robbery, was the next witness called.

When Apthorpe saw him ascend to the witness' chair, his face grew deathly pale, and he shot a glance at him that would have annihilated him if glances had that power.

"Were you with Frederick Apthorpe on the night of the 8th?" asked the young lawyer.

"I was."

"At what hour?"

"I was with him from eight o'clock in the evening, when I attended the meeting of the Dare-devils in his father's barn, until seven o'clock the next morning.

After we had left Tom Ordway's house and the rest of the boys had left us, Fred asked me to go home with him and spend the night. I agreed to do so, and I went."

"You did not lose sight of him until seven o'clock the following morning?"

"Only when I was asleep."

"At what hour did you go to sleep?"

"Not before two o'clock in the morning."

"Then you can swear that Apthorpe was not at Mrs. Ordway's cottage at the time when he says he witnessed the robbery?"

"I can. He told me that he was going to get up this yarn about Tom in order to wipe out a grudge he had against him. I promised him that I would not tell any one, but I thought better of it afterward, for I knew that Tom could not have been guilty of the robbery, and made up my mind that he should not suffer for another's crime because of my silence."

Again the old building shook with the applause of the spectators.

When quiet was restored by the threat of the judge that he would clear the courtroom if any more demonstrations of the sort occurred, Fred Apthorpe rose to his feet, his face livid with rage.

"I'll kill you for this," he fairly shrieked, shaking his fist at Jarvis.

He was quickly hustled out of the courtroom, and the trial proceeded.

It was evident enough now that Tom had won the popular sympathy, which is always accorded any one who seems to be persecuted.

The testimony of the few remaining witnesses was quickly taken, but as it was of comparatively little importance we omit it altogether.

Suffice it to say that within twenty minutes from the time that Ike Jarvis left the witness stand, Tom had been pronounced innocent and was receiving the congratulations of dozens of persons who had never spoken to him before in his life, but who were drawn to him now by the tie which makes all the world akin.

CHAPTER VI.

TOM LEAVES HOME.

"I don't know how I can ever repay you for what you have done for me," said our hero as he left the courtroom with Mr. Whitson, his lawyer.

"That's all right," was the laughing reply. "Mr. Travis has already repaid me, and handsomely, too. It was a lucky day for you, Tom, when you saved his daughter's life. Horace Travis is a man who never forgets a favor."

"He has already a good deal more than repaid me for the service I rendered him," said Tom. "But, Mr. Whitson, there is one thing I want to ask you."

"I think I know what it is," said the lawyer. "You want to know why Dr. Fields was put on the stand. I said nothing to you or to any one about it in advance, but I expected to give you all a genuine surprise. But the testimony was excluded, so that's the end of it."

"But you'll tell me, I suppose, what you expected to prove by the doctor?"

Mr. Whitson reflected a moment, then he said:

"No, not at present, my boy. It is better that you do not know. In fact, I do not know that I am at all sorry that the testimony of the doctor was not given. There might have been nothing in it, and possibly it would have caused a great deal of trouble."

With this Tom was forced to be content; but, as may be imagined, he was very curious to know the nature of this mysterious excluded testimony.

"One thing I must warn you of, Tom," said the lawyer gravely, "do not be deceived by the enthusiasm with which your acquittal was received to-day. In the heat of such an excitement most people will say and do anything; but you may depend upon it a pretty large proportion of those people who shook your hand to-day will, when their enthusiasm has cooled, come to the conclusion that they were too hasty. That is human nature. You will meet with rebuffs sometimes where you least expect them; for, although you have been acquitted, there will still be room for doubt as to your innocence in many minds.

"But there will not be," said Tom, "when the true criminal is discovered."

"And that time is not far distant, I hope," said Mr. Whitson. "His circulation of the marked money may be the cause of his detection. I am strongly impressed with the belief that the man who rode to New York with you that night is the robber. But one thing seems certain if the station-agent, Dalton's, testimony was correct, the scoundrel was some one personally known to your grandmother. Have you any suspicion of his identity?"

"Not the slightest," replied Tom. "I have spent hours in trying to solve that problem, but it's no use. I can't imagine whom it could have been. But some day I shall learn, and then the villain who would have made me suffer for his crime shall be punished as he deserves."

Tom found that Mr. Whitson's prediction was founded on good judgment. It took the popular enthusiasm but a very short time to cool.

Tom's rather "shady" record was called to mind, and people began to reflect that, after all, he might be guilty of the robbery, and that the fact that Fred Apthorpe had testified falsely did not weaken the other circumstantial evidence against him.

It took Tom but a few days to arrive at the conclusion that if he ever achieved any marked success in life it would have to be elsewhere than in Marbleville, and that the sooner he left the place and began the task of winning a new name and position the better.

Accordingly one morning, just a week after the trial, he again left for New York. And again Ned Dalton bade him good-by at the station.

"I now firmly believe you to be innocent, Tom, my boy," said the good-natured fellow; "but most of the people here don't, and I think you're acting wisely in going away. You'll succeed, never fear, and you'll yet force these people who condemn you now to acknowledge their mistake."

"You're right, Ned," said Tom, gratefully, "and you don't know how much those words of yours encourage me. But I'll succeed in spite of all Marbleville. I'm on my mettle now, Ned, and I know no such word as fail."

"That's the way to talk, Tom. But here's your train. Good-by, and the best of luck."

With a cordial hand-shake the two parted, Tom feeling that he had at least one faithful friend in Marbleville.

His journey to the metropolis was an uneventful one; but as he left the train at the Grand Central Depot he was startled not a little by seeing the black-bearded stranger whom he believed to be the author of all his recent misfortunes standing on the opposite side of Forty-second street.

Acting upon the impulse of the moment, he darted across the crowded thoroughfare.

The conduct of the stranger, when he saw him coming, convinced our hero that he had not been wrong in his suspicions, for the fellow turned upon his heel and darted into a saloon on the corner of Forty-second street and Park avenue—an old landmark, which has since been removed.

Tom rushed in close at his heels.

His sudden appearance and his excited manner created some commotion in the barroom.

"What's all this?" demanded the barkeeper, pausing in his work of preparing a "mixed drink."

"Where is he?" cried Tom, looking around him and seeing nothing of the stranger.

"Where is who?"

"The man who ran in here just now."

"He ran out again by the other door. What's the racket? Has he swiped your watch, or—"

But Tom did not stop to answer any questions. He rushed out again, and was just in time to see a carriage disappearing around the corner of Forty-first street.

"The feller you're chasing is in that cab," said one of the hackmen who always infest that neighborhood. "Want a kerriage to foller him?"

Tom eagerly nodded an assent, jumped into a hack, and was whirled away.

But the chase resulted in nothing, for when they turned the corner the other vehicle had disappeared, and Tom's driver either could not or would not find it again.

At the end of fifteen minutes our hero stepped out of the hack, greatly disappointed, but just as resolute as ever to find the fellow, whose presence in the neighborhood at the moment of his arrival in the city he did not believe to have been purely accidental.

"There's some strange mystery here," he said to himself, "but I will solve it. I'll go to Mr. Travis at once and ask his advice and help."

Half an hour later he presented himself at the store of his benefactor, a large wholesale establishment on lower Broadway.

He was met on his entrance by no less a personage than the Englishman, Fitz Roy, who greeted him with:

"Oh, it's you, is it, me fine fellah?"

"Yes, it is I," said Tom. "Is Mr. Travis in?"

"Do you want to see him?"

"Of course I do."

"No he isn't in; he's gone out of town, doncherknow, and he won't be back for a month."

Much disappointed, Tom was about to leave the store, when Mr. Travis emerged from his private office near the door.

"What do you mean by telling one of my friends that I am out?" he demanded sternly of Fitz Roy. "You didn't know that I was within ear-shot, did you?"

"I—I didn't suppose you'd want to see the fellah, doncherknow, sir?" stammered the Englishman.

"Well, don't take so much responsibility on your shoulders again," said the old gentleman, "or I shall be compelled to ship you back to the old country by

the next boat. Come in, my boy," he added, grasping Tom's hand cordially, and leading him into the private office.

When they were seated the merchant asked our hero for a full account of all that had occurred since the trial, and the boy told him his story as he would have told it to a father.

"It is as I expected," Mr. Travis said, when he had finished. "I was sure I should see you in New York ere many days had passed—so sure, in fact, that I reserved a place here for you, which you can step right into if you like."

Tom began to express his thanks, but the bluff old man stopped him.

"No thanks are necessary," he said, good-naturedly. "Your salary will be ten dollars a week, to begin with, and I've no doubt that you will earn every cent of it. And now if you want to begin work you can take your place at that desk yonder, and I'll tell you what to do."

Tom's first afternoon's work was in all respects successful, and his employer said, when the store closed at five o'clock:

"I see that you're going to be no hanger-on here, Tom. It won't take you long to learn the ropes, and when you have once mastered the details of the department to which I have assigned you, I'll venture to say that you'll be one of the most valued employes of the house."

Tom left the store that evening in the best of spirits, as may be imagined. He had yet to find a boarding-place, and he decided that he would go to a restaurant for supper, and then start out in search of a permanent house.

As he left the restaurant, having disposed of a hearty meal, he was met by a fashionably-dressed elderly man, who said:

"If I am not mistaken, you are the young man who chased a person into a saloon at the corner of Forty-second street and Park avenue this morning?"

"I am," replied our hero, in surprise.

"I thought so. I am a detective, and I want you to go with me to the chief of police. Do not be alarmed; all that is wanted of you is all the information that you are able to impart in regard to this man, who is a dangerous criminal. Tell what you know, and it may be the result of removing the cloud that hangs over you. You see I know you, my young friend."

"I will go with you at once," cried Tom, eagerly.

"Step into this cab," said the stranger, indicating a vehicle that stood in front of the restaurant.

Tom entered the cab, and was quickly followed by his companion.

Little did the boy imagine the frightful peril into which he was blindly rushing.

CHAPTER VII.

A COUNCIL OF TEN.

On the day after Tom's acquittal, ten men met in a room within a stone's throw of Madison Square, New York City.

The apartment was on the second floor of a dwelling-

house which had long been a puzzle to the residents of the other buildings in the immediate neighborhood.

In a great city like New York, no one knows very much about his next-door neighbor unless he takes particular pains to gain the information, and all sorts of queer doings go on under our very noses without attracting any special attention.

But the conduct of the occupants of No. 12 West — street was for many months so singular that the other residents of the vicinity felt themselves called upon to make some inquiries on the subject. One thing was certain—the house was not occupied as an ordinary dwelling.

Only men were ever seen entering it, and they usually went in in a manner which plainly showed that they were anxious to avoid observation.

But the investigations of the neighbors only elicited the information that the house was the headquarters of the Russell Social Club, an organization composed of a number of gentlemen of independent means.

With this explanation the curious were forced to be content. There seemed to be no really good cause of complaint against the social club.

The house was as quiet and orderly as any on the street, and if its members seemed to be exclusive, that was no one's affair but their own.

Could those who had interested themselves in the matter have attended the meeting of the organization on the day referred to at the commencement of this chapter they would have been fully enlightened as to the purposes of the Russell Social Club, and would have been a good deal startled.

The meeting was held in a large room on the second floor of the building. Ten men were present. The first thought of a stranger would have been one of wonder as to what sort of business could have brought together men so widely different in appearance.

There were several among the number upon whose faces were stamped the indelible and unmistakable impress of crime, low-browed ruffians of the sort that one would not care to meet in a lonely place on a dark night, and there were others of eminently respectable appearance, whom any one would have taken for well-to-do business men.

But there was one man present of aspect and manner so distinguished that he would have attracted attention anywhere. His features were of classical regularity, his eyes dark and piercing, his whole manner that of one who is born to command. He was seated upon a raised platform at one end of the room, the others all facing him.

When he had called the meeting to order he arose and said:

"Reports from members regarding their performance of the tasks assigned them at our last meeting are now in order. We will hear from you first, Black Barney."

A thick-set, hang-dog looking fellow slouched forward and took a position in front of the first speaker.

Had any member of the detective force been present, he would have been almost certain to recognize in Black Barney one of the most skilful burglars in the country, a man whose pre-eminence in his nefarious calling had gained him a national reputation.

"I ain't much of a hand at shootin' off my chin, as you knows, chief," he began, "but I've got that here that talks better than I kin," and he slapped his pocket energetically.

"You have succeeded, then, Barney?" said the chief.

"Seeing nothing about the affair in the papers, I came to the conclusion that there was a screw loose somewhere."

"Yes, I cracked the crib on Monday night," said the fellow, "and I got the shiners. But the fly-cops is on the wrong lay. They suspect one o' the family, and they're keepin' the matter quiet while they work up the case."

"You must have made a neat job of it, Barney," said the chief.

"You can bet I did, chief. They'd swear, any of them, that the shiners was swiped by some one inside the house. Oh, I ain't no slouch, I reckon, chief."

"I found that out long ago, Barney. But where are the diamonds?"

"Here they are," and the ruffian drew a small, velvet-covered case from his pocket and handed it to the chief, who opened it and gazed with glistening eyes at its contents.

"Magnificent!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "But, unluckily, they are not negotiable now. It won't do to put them on the market for a good many months yet. Well, I'll take care of them, and dispose of them at the first opportunity; and when I've done so, will divide the proceeds of the sale in the usual way—one half to you, who did the work, one quarter to me, and the remaining quarter to our fellow-members."

"Good enough, chief."

"Return to your seat, Barney."

The fellow obeyed.

The chief then called upon other members of the organization—which, as the reader is now aware, was nothing more nor less than a band of criminals united for mutual benefit—and received reports of several other jobs done in the neighborhood of the city. And in each case the spoils were handed to him, and in some instances divided on the spot, the chief in every case retaining one quarter for himself, and dividing the remainder in the proportions indicated in his speech to Black Barney.

Presently there came a pause.

Silence reigned, and there was a look of expectancy on every face.

The chief slowly arose.

"Fellow-members," he said, "it is evident that you think it my turn to speak now, and you are right. You are anxious to learn more about the job upon which I have been working myself, and which I refused to speak of at our last meeting because my task was not yet fully accomplished. Well, it is not yet accomplished, but the time has come when I must confide in you. This job is the largest one we have ever undertaken, and if my hopes are realized it will make wealthy men of us all. It is a job that I might work alone solely for my own benefit, and the fact that I do not do so is proof to you that I appreciate the fairness of your dealings with me in the past. You have always dealt squarely with your chief, and he will always do the same by you."

These remarks, couched in terms suitable for the comprehension of his audience, were received with a murmur of applause. When it had died away the chief resumed:

"As this is a case upon which so much depends, and as it may require some very fine work, I will give a brief history of it so far as it has progressed, in order that every member may have a perfectly clear understanding of it.

"Several weeks ago I stated at one of our meetings

that I had been informed of the existence, in a small village named Marbleville, in a neighboring State, of an old woman reputed to possess great wealth. Report had it that this old woman, whose name was Ordway, was a miser, and that, concealed in the miserable hovel which she occupied, was a considerable amount of money.

"This report was so well authenticated, that I stated the case to you, and asked you to take some action in the matter. You voted that work should be begun on the case at once, and that it should be given to me.

"Now, although for private reasons I would have greatly preferred to have some one else do the work on this particular case, I said nothing, for as I have always insisted upon your unquestioning obedience to the laws which we have formed for our government, I felt that I could not consistently ask for any concession in my own favor, although I knew that it would be readily granted. Therefore I at once acquiesced in your decision and prepared to commence work on the case."

This statement was received with manifestations of approval.

The chief commanded silence by a gesture, and continued his story.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STORY OF THE ROBBERY.

"I first made a number of inquiries as to the old woman's manner of living, with which, I may state, I had some acquaintance in past years. I found that she lived the same miserable, solitary life that she did when I knew her, and that she had become, if possible, even more penurious. In the village she had the reputation of possessing immense, almost fabulous wealth. I did not take stock in all the stories of this sort I heard, knowing how such reports grow, but I was satisfied that there was a large-sized grain of truth in them.

"Carefully disguised, I visited Marbleville and made myself thoroughly familiar with the scene of my work. I finally decided upon the night of the 8th inst. as the best time to do the job.

"I learned that on that evening the old woman would be alone in her hut, and everything seemed to transpire to make the time a particularly favorable one for the successful accomplishment of my purpose.

"I reached Mrs. Ordway's hovel—the place in which she lived scarcely deserves a better name—at nearly eleven o'clock, somewhat later than I had intended.

"I knocked at the door, which was opened by the hag herself. I told her that I wished to see her on business, but she replied that she could not see me then, and was about to slam the door in my face, when I forced my way past her and entered a room in which I had seen a light as I approached the house.

"Mrs. Ordway closely followed me, demanding in a shrill voice what I wanted. I quietly informed her that the less noise she made the better, and that I wanted to know the hiding-place of her money.

"As I said this I watched her closely, and saw her eyes instinctively seek a small chest that stood in one corner of the room. This was enough for me; of

course I knew that the money was in that chest. I approached it, but as I did so the old woman rushed toward me, at the same time drawing a revolver from her pocket and cocking it.

"In a moment I had forced the weapon from her grasp and transferred it to my own pocket. I then warned her that if she did not keep quiet it would go hard with her.

"But the hag had plenty of grit. She made a rush for the door, calling loudly for help. I was forced to bind and gag her, but before I did so she called me by a name which I have not heard for many a long year—the name by which I used to be known to her in the past. She had recognized me by my voice. This surprised, but did not disturb me, for the name is one that perhaps had been forgotten by every human being save her, and it was highly improbable that the fact of her recognition of me would at any time lead to my identification.

"I had some little trouble in opening the chest, but succeeded at last. Its contents appeared to consist principally of old clothes. I tossed them out on the floor, and found at the bottom of the chest a small, oblong paper parcel. I tore it open and found that it contained several small packages of bank-notes and a sealed envelope.

"While I was in the act of distributing these things in my various pockets I heard a tap on a door at my elbow. I had heard no one enter the house, but I know that this must be Tom Ordway, the old woman's grandson. Fearing that, if he received no reply, he might suspect that something was wrong, and force an entrance to the room, I imitated the old woman's voice as well as I could, and asked him what he wanted. He replied—thinking, of course, that he was addressing his grandmother—by making a complaint of the old woman's penuriousness and threatening to run away. I told him to go, and he left the house almost immediately.

"As soon as he was well out of the way I left the house and made the best time I could to the railroad depot, for a train was almost due. I was just in time to catch it, and I seated myself next young Ordway.

"An idea had occurred to me by which I thought it possible that I might put the detectives on the wrong scent in case the affair made any stir.

"During the journey to the city I found an opportunity to count the boodle I had secured. I knew that the haul had not been as great as I had expected, but I was much disappointed to find that the parcel contained less than five thousand dollars, all in one- and five-hundred-dollar bills.

"Before the train reached New York I managed to slip several of the bills—all of which were marked—into the boy's pocket. I knew that this might or might not prove a good move, but I thought the risk worth taking. And, as it turned out, the discovery of those bills in his possession was almost sufficient to convict him. Luckily it did not have that result—if it had it would have been a bad day's work for me.

"You look surprised; I will explain my meaning. After my arrival in the city I found in my pocket the sealed envelope which, as I told you, was in the package with the money, and which I had forgotten about. I opened it, scarcely expecting that its contents would prove of any importance. But they were of the utmost value, for they revealed the existence of an immense fortune possessed by the old woman, Ordway."

This announcement created a sensation, and all waited in breathless interest for the revelation which they felt was about to be made.

"It is evident enough from this document," continued the chief, taking a folded paper from his pocket, "that the old woman was insane, but there was method in her madness, for she succeeded in accumulating a colossal fortune. The acquirement of wealth seemed to be the one object of her existence, and for money there was no sacrifice too great for her to make. She deprived herself of every luxury, even of all but the barest necessities of life, and for what? that we might reap the benefit of her folly.

"But all this does not interest you, and perhaps I speak too warmly, for, as I told you, I knew the hag well years ago, and have some personal feeling in the matter. I will now read you this paper, which was inclosed in an envelope, upon which was written: 'Not to be opened until after my death, and then only by my grandson, Thomas Ordway.'"

The chief unfolded the paper, and without further preliminary read as follows:

"My Dear Grandson—Throughout my life I have been accused of meanness because I have always had a proper idea of the value of money. I have devoted much of my time and energy to the accumulation of wealth ever since I was a mere girl. I have been told that it was folly to deprive myself of those things which are to most people all that make life worth the living; but my only reply is that I have enjoyed life in my own way, and that I hope you may have as much pleasure in spending my fortune as I have had in saving it. For you, Thomas, my only living relative, are to be my heir.

"The few thousand dollars left me by my father have, by my judicious management, increased many thousand-fold, and I am to-day a far richer woman than you or any one else imagines. I have twice lost large sums of money—once by the failure of a New York bank, and once on account of my implicit trust in one who basely deceived me. After the last experience I determined to trust no one again, but to hide my money where no one but myself or my authorized representative could ever find it. I did so, and it has lain in its hiding-place for more than fifteen years. I have forfeited the interest which the money might have earned me, but I have made sure of the principal.

"The purpose of this letter is to tell you of the place where your inheritance is concealed. You will remember the spot to which I took you on the evening of your twelfth birthday. That is where my treasure is hidden. Part of it is in gold, and part in diamonds, and the aggregate value is nearly three million dollars. All, all is yours. You are the only person living in whose veins flows the same blood that courses in mine. My wretched son, your father, might have been my heir, but his treacherous conduct forced me to disown him, and he died long since in a foreign land, a fugitive from justice.

"Many years will probably elapse before you read these lines, for though an old woman, I come of a long lived family; but whenever you do read them, go at once to the place of which I have spoken and take possession of your inheritance.

"You cannot forget the spot, and you will have no trouble in locating the treasure. This letter will explain to you many hints which I have seen fit to drop

at different times regarding the existence of this property. EUNICE CONWAY."

CHAPTER XI.

TOM IN DANGER.

The chief refolded the paper and returned it to his pocket.

"Then," spoke up one of the ten, a somewhat more intelligent-looking man than most of his companions, "the secret of the hiding-place of this old mad-woman's fortune is known only to this boy, who does not suspect its existence?"

"Exactly. He is the only person who can lead us to it."

"But may not the old woman have revealed the secret to some one else?"

"That is extremely improbable. Certainly she did not after the robbery, for she died only a few minutes later of heart disease, brought on by the excitement, and in her dying utterances, which were repeated at the boy's trial, there was no reference to the subject. She was about to reveal my name—it was on her lips when she died."

"Was the boy convicted?"

"Luckily for us," replied the chief, "he was not. Had he been we might have had to wait some time before gaining the information we desire. No, he was acquitted, and is now in Marbleville, and no time must be lost in finding an opportunity to question him. I think it unwise that I undertake the task myself, for although I was pretty effectually disguised on the occasion of my former visit there as a chance that I might be recognized, or at any rate suspected, and detained. I therefore delegate the task to you, Sturgis"—addressing the man who had been questioning him.

"I will perform it faithfully," said the fellow, rising and bowing respectfully.

"I am sure of that," was the reply. "The work ought to be easy enough. All that is needed is a little tact, and that you possess in abundance, Sturgis."

"I shall succeed, never fear, chief."

But he did not.

The expedition proved an unlucky one for him, for on the second day of his stay in Marbleville he was arrested by a detective who was in the place working on a case, and who chanced to recognize him as a well-known confidence man who had been "wanted" for some time on a number of different charges.

This caused a delay in the consummation of the chief's schemes; but a watch was put upon Tom Ordway's movements, and when it was learned that he contemplated removing to the city, it was decided to postpone further work on the case until his arrival.

Our hero's adventures after he reached New York have already been related. The reader will remember that he was addressed as he was leaving the restaurant where he had had his supper, by a stranger, who had induced him to enter a carriage, which was then driven rapidly away.

For some time Tom and his companion sat in silence.

At last the boy, becoming impatient, asked:

"How much further is it?"

"We shall be there in a few minutes," was the laconic reply.

The vehicle was now passing through a street in the lower part of the city.

The sidewalks were crowded with squalid-looking people, heads peered from every window of the high tenement-houses on either side, the filth and dirt that surrounded them amazed and appalled the unsophisticated country boy.

The carriage stopped, and Tom's companion said:

"Here we are, my boy."

Tom looked around him in astonishment.

The vehicle had come to a standstill in front of a tall brick building, the lower floor of which was occupied as a liquor saloon.

All the surroundings were filthy in the extreme, and the miserable, half-clad creatures who stood about gazed in amazement at the unusual spectacle of a carriage—a thing seldom seen in that neighborhood except on the occasion of a funeral.

"You don't mean to say that this is the police headquarters?" exclaimed our hero.

"Of course not."

"Then why have you brought me here?"

"Because those were my orders. The chief is here waiting to question you. Look lively, now, for it makes him ugly to have to wait long."

And the speaker hustled the bewildered boy into the saloon.

If Tom had been a New York boy he would, of course, have seen at once that there was something wrong. But everything was so new, so strange to him, his surroundings were so different from those to which he had been accustomed, that he was dazed and bewildered, and scarcely knew which way to turn.

The saloon contained only a ruffianly-looking man, who was stationed behind the bar. Of him Tom's conductor asked:

"Where's the chief?"

"In yonder," and the fellow pointed to a glass door at the rear of the saloon.

Tom's companion opened it, revealing a small, dirty room furnished only with a table and a couple of chairs. At the table were seated an elderly man of rather distinguished appearance, who looked up and smiled as Tom entered.

"This seems to you a rather singular place to receive you in," he said, "but circumstances have made it necessary for me to be here to-night. We detectives are brought in contact with all sorts of people, and forced to visit all sorts of places."

These words somewhat reassured the boy, who had begun to be suspicious that all was not right.

"What do you want to see me for?" he asked.

"Merely to ask you a few questions regarding the singular case with which you have been so prominently identified. Your name is Thomas Ordway?"

"It is, sir."

"Your age?"

Tom gave it. His interrogator followed with a number of apparently unimportant questions, which puzzled our hero a good deal.

"What is he trying to get at?" he mused, his suspicions beginning to return. "This is a queer business, anyhow."

He glanced toward the door.

"Becoming impatient?" smiled the man at the table.

"Ah, well, it will not be necessary for me to question you much more. And now tell me if you recall the events of the evening of your twelfth birthday?"

Tom stared at his questioner in surprise.

"I do," he replied.

"On that evening your grandmother and you visited a certain place."

"We did."

"Do you recollect the location of that place?"

"I do."

"Where was it?"

"I cannot answer that question."

"You cannot?" cried the alleged detective, his brow clouding.

"No."

"But you must. I insist."

"That makes no difference," said Tom, firmly; "I shall not."

"Why do you refuse?"

"For reasons of my own."

"Suppose I told you that it was absolutely necessary for you to do so in order that we can discover the thief of your grandmother's money?"

"I can see no connection between the two things. I repeat that I will not answer that question."

And Tom turned to leave the place. But his interrogator sprang to his feet and placed himself between the boy and the door.

"You cannot leave this house," he said, "until you have answered that question."

CHAPTER X.

TOM A PRISONER.

Tom Ordway gazed at his companion in speechless amazement for a few moments; then he said:

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say," was the quiet reply, as the man planked himself squarely in front of the door.

"That I must answer that question before you will permit me to leave this place?"

"Just so."

"But what has the question got to do with the theft of my grandmother's money?"

"Everything."

"Explain."

"I will not."

"Then I will not answer the question."

"Do you realize whom you are addressing?" demanded the stranger, fixing his dark, penetrating eyes upon the boy's face.

"No, I don't think I do," replied Tom, with characteristic bluntness.

"What do you mean by that reply?" frowned the man.

"I mean that I do not believe that you are the chief of police any more than that these are police headquarters."

"Oh, you don't, eh?" sneered the boy's companion.

"I do not."

"Well, suppose I told you that you were right."

"I should believe that."

"Then I will inform you that you are. You are not

quite as big a fool as I thought you, but you are no match for those in whose hands you are now."

"Why have I been brought to this place?" demanded Tom.

"In order that a little information might be elicited from you."

"The questions that you have asked me thus far have been of no importance, with one exception."

"True."

"It was, then, to find out where I spent a part of the evening of my twelfth birthday that you enticed me to this place?"

"Perhaps so, but why do you consider that question a particularly important one?"

"Because you are so anxious to obtain an answer to it."

"Shrewd boy! Well, then, why do you not answer it?"

"Principally because I made a promise not to."

"To your grandmother?"

"Yes; but even had I not made that promise I should not give you the information you desire, because I am sure that you want it for no good purpose."

"Humph! you do not know why I want it?"

"I do not."

"Good! Before you leave this place, boy, you will give me a reply to that question."

"I shall not."

"You do not know what you are saying;" and the stranger smiled significantly.

Tom realized that he was in the power of a band of desperate men, that his first impressions of the character of the place to which he had been brought were correct ones.

It would be idle to say that he was not alarmed for his safety, that he had not at least a partial understanding of the peril of his position.

The mystery that had surrounded his grandmother's life seemed to have deepened since her tragic death.

The greed of gold that had been the curse of her existence seemed now to be casting its baleful shadow before him.

But it was not Tom's way to show the white feather. Boldly stepping toward his captor, he said:

"Open that door and let me out of this place."

The stranger laughed.

"Not exactly, my young friend. You had better quiet down a little now, and take things philosophically."

Tom had not, of course, expected that the door would be opened and he permitted to take his leave. His movement had been only a feint.

While talking with his companion he had taken a quick survey of the room, and had observed that there were two windows in the rear.

Quickly turning now, he rushed toward one of them, threw it open, and leaped out.

Knowing that the saloon was on the first floor of the building, he had naturally supposed that the window was but a few feet from the ground.

The darkness was impenetrable, but the boy was willing to rush to the dangers that he knew not of rather than to confront those which surrounded him, and which seemed insurmountable.

He supposed, as he vaulted from the window, that his feet would immediately touch terra firma, but, to his consternation, he continued to descend for a least twenty feet, until his fall was broken with a force that robbed him of consciousness.

His late companion rushed toward the window with an oath.

The man who had brought Tom to the place hastily re-entered the room, asking:

"What's the matter, chief? Where's the kid?"

"Gone!"

"Gone? Where?"

"He's leaped out of the window, curse him!"

"Into the pit?"

"Yes; and the chances are that he has killed himself."

"Couldn't you stop him?"

"If I could have done so of course I should, you fool."

"Well, maybe he isn't killed, chief."

"If he is the secret has died with him, and old Eunice Ordway's money will never be ours."

"Are you sure he fell into the pit?"

"Yes, I heard him, I tell you. The opening should have been kept covered."

"True. Well, let us go down below and see whether he's alive or dead, chief."

"Lead on, Morrill, I'll follow."

Having procured a lamp, Morrill, who, as the reader has guessed, was one of the so-called "Russell Social Club," opened a door at one side of the apartment, revealing a long flight of narrow stairs, which he began to descend, followed by the chief.

The cellar of the building was of unusual height, and was divided into a series of half a dozen or more compartments, separated from each other by solid masonry, and each provided with a massive iron door.

Hurrying through a long, narrow passageway, they came to a shaft by which the subterranean apartment was ventilated.

It was down this shaft that Tom Ordway had fallen, and the two men now beheld him lying pale and motionless upon the cellar floor.

The chief bent over him.

"Is he dead?" queried Morrill.

"No, he breathes," was the response.

"Much hurt, do you think?"

"I imagine not; there are no outward signs of injury, at any rate. He is pretty well shaken up, but I fancy that's all."

"What shall we do with him, chief?"

"Pick him up and follow me. Give me the lamp."

Morrill lifted the unconscious boy in his powerful arms. As he did so an exclamation of astonishment escaped his lips.

"What's the matter?" demanded the chief.

"This is the first good look I've had at the boy's face," said Morrill.

"Well?" questioned his companion, impatiently.

"Well, don't you see what an extraordinary resemblance he bears to you, chief?"

"To me! bah! nothing but your imagination," said the chief, roughly.

"But," persisted Morrill, "look at him and tell me if—"

"Enough of this folly," interrupted the chief, as he unlocked and threw open one of the iron doors. "Whether the boy does or does not resemble me is of no moment. Put him in here."

As he spoke he held the lamp so that it illumined the apartment he had indicated. It was an unfurnished cell, perhaps ten feet square.

Morrill laid the boy upon the floor. Then the chief closed and locked the heavy iron door.

CHAPTER IX.

A MYSTERIOUS WOMAN.

"He's safe for the present," said the chief, as, followed by his companion, he retraced his steps toward the stairs. "When he has recovered his consciousness I'll have a little interview with him."

"You believe that you can make him reveal the secret?"

"I will force it from him. Do you suppose I will allow myself to be baffled by a boy like him?"

"But, chief, I'll tell you one thing."

"Well?"

"I saw the same look of determination on his face that I have often seen on yours. You have not an ordinary boy to deal with."

"I believe you; but I'll break his spirit."

"The resemblance that he bears to you is strange," said Morrill meditatively. "One might easily fancy that the same blood flowed in your veins."

The chief was in advance of his companion. He turned suddenly, and there was an expression of rage upon his face that caused Morrill to involuntarily retreat a pace or two.

"Never refer to this subject again," he hissed fiercely as he clutched the fellow by the throat, "or you will regret it as long as you live."

He shook his companion so violently that the lamp dropped from his grasp and was shattered on the stone floor.

Intense darkness surrounded them.

"Do you hear me?" continued the chief. "If I thought you would not obey I would put an end to you here in the darkness, and to-morrow morning your carcass would be found in the river, and would furnish the lovers of sensation and mystery with new food for speculation. Morrill, you know my power—take care that you do not provoke me again."

"Enough, chief," said the fellow sullenly. "I'd no intention of offending you."

The chief released his hold upon his companion's throat, and without making any response strode on through the darkness with the sure steps of one perfectly familiar with his surroundings, and a moment later he had reached the cellar-stairs.

So great was the fear that the strange, autocratic ruler of this band of lawless men had instilled into the minds of his followers, that when they again reached the small room in the rear of the saloon, Morrill's face was deathly pale, notwithstanding the fact that he was the equal, if not the superior, in physical strength to his companion.

The men under his command regarded their chief with almost superstitious reverence, and to incur his displeasure was regarded as a positive calamity.

"I meant no offence, chief," almost pleaded Morrill.

"I bear you no malice," was the response, uttered in a mild tone; "but the subject upon which you touched is one which must never be renewed."

With these words he re-entered the saloon, which still contained but one person, the ruffianly-looking man behind the bar, whom the reader would have recognized as "Black Barney," one of the Russel Club.

"Where's the kid?" he asked.

"In the cellar," replied the chief.

"Has he told—"

"Nothing; but he will. He fell down the shaft and

hurt himself, but not seriously, I think. He is unconscious now, or was when I left him."

"Is he locked up?"

"Of course. Here's the key. Take a look at him by and by."

"I'll do so, chief."

"I shall return in the morning."

"Good enough, chief."

The man left the place and hurried in the direction of Broadway.

Judging from the expression of his face, his thoughts were not of the pleasantest description.

When he had reached the thoroughfare mentioned he hailed a cab, and half an hour later was set down at the entrance of a tall, almost palatial building in one of the most aristocratic portions of the city.

The edifice was devoted exclusively to bachelor apartments, and was occupied only by that fortunate class who can afford to indulge in every luxury, regardless of cost.

As he entered he was greeted respectfully by the liveried servant who opened the door, and who said:

"There's been a lady here to see you, Mr. Belden."

"A lady!" exclaimed the chief, in evident surprise.

"Who was she?"

"She left no card, sir, and would give no name, but she was the same lady who has been here before."

The man checked an oath.

"The—the tall, veiled lady?"

"Yes, sir. She has called twice this evening, and left word that she would be back again."

"To-night?"

"Yes, Mr. Belden. She said that it was a matter of great importance."

"I will not see her. If she comes again, tell her so."

"Very good, sir."

The chief entered the elevator, and was borne up stairs to his suite of rooms, which was situated on one of the upper floors.

"Then I was mistaken!" he murmured; "this mysterious woman was not she! Curse her! Who and what can she be? I cannot—I will not—see her."

As he spoke, he opened the door of his suite and turned on the electric light, revealing a wide, magnificently-furnished hallway, connected by a series of doors with the various rooms of the suite.

He had scarcely closed the door when he was startled by a light tap upon it.

Flinging it open, he was confronted by a servant, who bore a card upon a salver.

"The lady has returned, Mr. Belden."

The chief seized the card and scanned it closely.

Upon one side was written the name "Madame Larue," and upon the other was hastily scrawled these words:

"I must see you to-night about the boy, Thomas Ordway. Do not refuse me."

Belden hesitated a moment; then he said:

"Show her up."

"Mr. Belden isn't over-glad to see her, I fancy," muttered the man, as he hurried away. "There was a look in his eye that means no good for her, if I ain't mistaken."

The chief entered a palatially-appointed room and threw himself into a chair.

"What is the meaning of this?" he muttered. "What can this mysterious woman know about the boy? What is he to her? I will solve the mystery of her identity this night—I swear it!"

His reflections were interrupted by a light footstep. Looking up, he saw his visitor standing before him.

She was a tall, singularly-erect woman, dressed entirely in black, her face completely concealed by a heavy crape veil.

"I thought you would decide to see me," she said, with a harsh laugh.

"Woman, who are you?" cried Belden.

"Did not my card tell you? I am Madame Larue."

"It is the only name you have ever given me, but I do not believe that it is your own."

"It does not matter—one name will serve my purpose as well as another."

"Why do you dog my footsteps thus?" demanded the chief. "During the past year——"

"During the past year," interrupted the woman, "I have visited you in this place four times, and each time you have found me in possession of the inmost secrets of your heart. My identity is a mystery to you, and shall remain so."

"I thought——" began Belden.

"You thought," again interposed his singular visitor, "you suspected that I was the old woman, Eunice Ordway. But she now lies beneath the sod, so you see that you were wrong."

"Who, then, are you?"

"Madame Larue—and your fate," was the response; and Belden could feel, though he could not see, the eyes of his strange companion bent fiercely upon his face.

Seldom had his imperturbability been so severely taxed.

"Well, well, what do you want?" he demanded, with an attempt at bravado.

The woman approached a pace or two nearer him.

"I want to know what you have done with the boy, Thomas Ordway," she said, in low, intense tones. "Where is he?"

CHAPTER XII.

AN ATTEMPTED RESCUE.

Belden gazed at his companion as if he would pierce the veil that enshrouded her face.

"What is the boy to you?" he asked.

"It matters not," was the reply. "Where is he?"

"How do I know?"

"You do know, and you shall tell me!"

"I do not know."

"Liar! He was enticed away by one of your men, the fellow you call Morrill."

"You seem to know a good deal," said the chief, after a short pause.

"I know more—far more than you think."

"Indeed? And how have you gained all this information?"

"That is my secret."

"Keep your secret, then; and find out the whereabouts of the boy in the same way—if you can."

"Mark Belden," hissed the woman, "have a care! Do not trifle with me. I will save that boy or ruin you."

Belden uttered a forced laugh.

"Ruin me!—you? How do you propose to accomplish that result?"

"By proclaiming to the world what I know about your past life. In this house you are known as Mark Belden, a wealthy bachelor of independent fortune. They little suspect that you are the chief of a band of desperadoes, and that not one penny of the wealth you enjoy was honestly earned."

"Do not think to alarm me or to move me by your threats," said the chief, with unruffled exterior. "If that is all you have to say you had better go."

"But it is not all!" cried the woman. "Suppose I revealed events which you believe buried in the past? Suppose I told the world that your name is not Mark Belden, but that you are the notorious criminal——"

She finished the sentence in a whisper, uttered in her companion's ear.

Every vestige of color left the man's face.

"That name!" he gasped.

"You see you are in my power," went on the woman. "Were I so inclined I could drag you even to the gallows. And I will do it if you do not promise me that not one hair of that boy's head shall be harmed."

"Fiend!" almost shrieked Belden, "who are you? I must, I will know!"

By a sudden movement he threw aside her veil.

But his curiosity remained unsatisfied, for the woman's face was masked.

"You see, I anticipated some such attempt on your part," she said, with a low, mocking laugh, "and provided for it. You will find me your match every time. And now"—as she replaced the veil—"enough of this folly. Again I demand to know what you have done with that boy."

"And again I refuse to tell you."

"You defy me?"

"I do."

"Enough! I shall take other means to gain the information I desire, and if I find that the boy has suffered at your hands I shall reveal all and do a service to the world by exposing your true colors."

With these words, the woman turned to leave the room. The next instant she heard a sharp "click," as to the nature of which there could be no mistake.

She turned quickly. Belden was in the act of leveling a revolver at her head.

Instantly she seized the weapon, and by a quick, unexpected movement wrested it from his grasp.

"The same revolver that you took from the old woman, Eunice Ordway, on the night of her death," she said, coolly. "I recognized it at once. You see, I know all about that crime. I will retain this weapon, with your permission—it may serve as evidence against you some day. Good-evening, Mark Belden; remember my warning."

With these words, she noiselessly glided from the room.

Belden sank into a chair.

"If I were superstitious," he muttered, "I should say that that woman was something more than mortal. Who is she that seems to read even my inmost thoughts, that makes a child of me—of me, before whom even the most desperate tremble? Bah! I'll not allow myself to fear her. I'll go on as I have planned; but I will be on my guard, and it will be strange if this woman manages to thwart me."

Let us now return to Tom.

When he regained consciousness he staggered to his feet in bewilderment.

One by one the events of the day and evening came crowding upon him.

"I remember now," he muttered. "I jumped from the window and fell a long distance, and that's all I can recollect. Well, I'm not much hurt, I guess; no bones broken, anyhow. Where am I, I wonder?"

He happened to have a few matches in his pocket. He lighted one of them and gazed eagerly about him.

As he espied the iron door he rushed toward it and attempted to open it. But it resisted all his efforts.

"I am a prisoner!" burst from his lips. "Help—help!"

Again and again he uttered the cry, but there was no response.

For hours he paced the floor of his cell like a caged animal.

At last, overcome with exhaustion, he sank to the floor, and in a few minutes was buried in slumber.

He was awakened by a touch upon his shoulder.

Opening his eyes, he saw the chief standing over him. The dungeon was dimly illumined by the rays of a lamp which stood upon the floor in one corner.

Tom sprang to his feet.

"So you've been asleep, have you?" said Belden. "Not much the worse for your adventure, I see."

Without replying, the boy started for the door. But his companion quickly closed and locked it.

"Not yet," he said. "Are you ready to answer the question I asked you last night?"

"No," replied Tom, firmly.

"Still obstinate, eh?"

"I shall never answer that question."

"Indeed? We shall see. You will remain here until you do."

"You mean to keep me a prisoner in this place?"

"Most assuredly I do; and let me warn you that there is a limit to my patience. If you do not decide to give me the information I ask within a very short time, it will be forced from you."

"No force can make me reveal that secret," said Tom, quietly.

"We shall see, my boy, we shall see."

Belden picked up the lamp, and without another word left the apartment, closing and locking the door after him.

Again Tom was in total darkness.

In desperation, the boy threw himself against the door again and again, but it resisted all his efforts.

Then he spent an hour or so in a fruitless attempt to pick the lock.

While he was thus engaged, he fancied that he heard a footstep outside the door.

He paused and listened.

The next moment a key was inserted in the lock, and again the door swung rustily on its hinges.

A tall, heavily-veiled woman entered. In her hand she carried a lighted candle.

Tom uttered an involuntary exclamation of surprise.

"Hush!" said the newcomer, in a low voice. "I am here to save you!"

"To save me?"

"Yes. Not another word, but follow me."

Tom obeyed in silence, his heart beating high with hope.

But scarcely had they left the dungeon when they were confronted by Belden.

"Trapped!" exclaimed the villain, a smile of malicious, almost fiendish, triumph on his lips. "Now,

madam, the tables are turned, and you are in my power. Neither you nor that boy whom you have risked so much to rescue shall leave this place alive."

CHAPTER XIII.

A WOMAN'S STRATAGEM.

We must now explain the unexpected appearance of Madame Larue in Tom Ordway's cell.

A few minutes before the events with which our last chapter closed, while Black Barney was dozing behind his bar, he was aroused and considerably startled by the sudden entrance of a tall, veiled woman.

"You are Black Barney?" she said in quick, abrupt tones.

"That's what folks call me," was the reply, as the ruffian rubbed his eyes and tried to "brace up" a little.

He had been out on a "professional" expedition the night before, and was not in particularly good "form."

"Who may you be, marm?" he added, scrutinizing his visitor closely, as if trying to penetrate the thick folds of the veil that concealed her features.

"That does not matter to you," she answered. "Suffice it that I come from the chief."

"From the chief, marm?"

"I said so."

"And what may your business be?"

"There is a boy imprisoned in this place."

"A boy? What boy?" asked Barney, with a well-assumed look of innocence.

"There is no need of any evasion," said the woman impatiently. "Don't I tell you that I come from the chief?"

"So you say, marm."

"And do you not believe me?"

"Why should I?" asked Black Barney.

"True; I am a stranger to you, but I am in the chief's confidence."

"He don't place much confidence in women, generally."

"That is so, but there are few of his affairs with which I am not acquainted."

"It's easy enough for you to say so."

"Well, well, I am not here to bandy words with you, fellow," said the woman, with the same haughty, commanding air that she had used throughout her interview with Barney. "I will give you proof that I come from your chief."

"What proof?"

"Suppose I can give you the password?"

"The password?"

"Yes. Suppose the chief has told it to me in order that I may convince you that I come from him?"

"Of course, marm, if you give me the password I'll know you're all right."

"Very well; it is 'Every man for himself.'"

Black Barney started.

"Hush! not so loud. I didn't suppose you had it. I thought at first that you was tryin' to play it on me."

"I know you did. Well, you see, you were mistaken, Barney. And now I want to see the boy."

"You want to see the boy?" stammered the ruffian.

"At once."

"But the—the chief——"

"Don't I tell you that I come from him? He has sent the boy a message by me."

"I wish he'd sent a bit o' writin', ma'am."

"Still doubtful? I see that the chief did not exaggerate the strength of his authority over you. Well, fortunately, I can convince you that I am just what I represent myself to be—a messenger from the chief."

"How?"

"He told me in case I had any difficulty in convincing you of my identity to exhibit this to you."

As she spoke she drew a ring from her finger and extended it to her companion.

Black Barney seized and scanned it closely.

"It's the chief's seal!" he exclaimed.

"Exactly."

"That's all right, then, marm; but we can't be too careful."

"I understand; but too much time has been wasted in talk already. I must see the boy without further delay."

"All right; I'll go down with you," and Black Barney arose.

"He's down in the cellar, then?" the woman interposed.

"Yes."

"You needn't accompany me."

"You couldn't find your way without me, ma'am."

"Could I not? Black Barney, I know this house from cellar to garret."

"You know the house?"

"Better than you think. I will go to the boy alone."

"But——"

"I will go alone, I say. I have a message for the boy from the chief, which no ears save his must hear."

"Nough said, marm."

"Get me a light and the necessary keys."

Black Barney obeyed and accompanied his strange visitor to the head of the long flight of stairs which led to the cellar.

"Leave me here," the woman said authoritatively.

And Black Barney, overawed by the singular force of her individuality, made an awkward bow and retired.

"This 'ere's a queer start," he muttered, as he shuffled back behind his bar. "I don't take no stock in women, an' I thought better o' the chief. To give away the password, too! I can't get over that, neither. Hope the chief ain't makin' no mistake in this business."

Thus ruminating, Black Barney settled himself back in his chair and tried to interest himself in the contents of an English sporting paper.

But his eyelids soon drooped, and he fell into a doze again.

He was presently aroused by the entrance of a man.

"Ah, chief," he said, recognizing Belden, and pulling himself together; "is that you?"

"Yes, it is I, Barney. Have you seen the boy lately?"

"No, chief; but the lady's with him now."

"Lady? What lady?" demanded Belden.

"Why, the lady that you sent."

"That I sent?"

"Why, didn't you send her, chief?"

"Where's the key?" cried Belden, without replying to his companion's question.

"She's got it."

The chief made a rush for the cellar door, followed by Barney.

"Remain where you are," ordered Belden, turning angrily upon him. "Go back to your bar; I'll return shortly."

"Now, what does all this mean?" soliloquized Barney, as he returned to the saloon. "Did the chief send her, or didn't he? If he did, I s'pose it's all right, but if he didn't I'll have to take all the blame."

To console himself he poured out half a tumbler of a fiery decoction labeled "Whisky," and swallowed it, smacking his lips afterward with apparent relish.

Meanwhile Belden was making the best of his way toward Tom's cell.

"Curse her!" he muttered, "she's found him—for I'll swear that the woman that Barney speaks of is she and no other. She must have shadowed me to this place this morning. Well, she has sealed her own fate; and I shall know at last who this mysterious Madame Larue really is. Ah! voices."

At this moment Madame Larue and Tom emerged from the cell and were met by Belden, as related at the close of the preceding chapter.

For a few moments the trio stood as if rooted to the spot.

Belden's revolver was leveled at the head of Madame Larue, and his eyes gleamed with mingled hatred and triumph as he gazed upon the veiled woman.

He was the first to break the silence.

"It was you," he said, "who sent me the anonymous message, purporting to be from one of my men, asking me to go to Brooklyn at once."

"It was," replied the woman.

And if she was in the least agitated by the trying position in which she found herself placed, her voice did not betray the fact.

"Fortunately," went on Belden, "I happened to meet the man from whom the note purported to come, and learned that the communication was a forgery. Suspecting the truth, I came here, and am just in time, it seems."

Until this moment Madame Larue had stood as motionless as if she had been carved out of marble; now she suddenly sprang forward.

CHAPTER XIV.

RESCUED.

"You she-devil!" hissed Belden, as the woman attempted to force the revolver from his grasp, "you shall not escape me this time!"

The woman uttered a mocking laugh. The next moment a peculiar, pungent odor filled the place.

At the same moment the revolver was discharged.

Belden fell to the floor, where he remained motionless.

Tom sprang forward with a low exclamation.

"Do not be alarmed," said Madame Larue; "we are safe for the present at least."

"But he?"—pointing to the prostrate man.

His companion exhibited a small vial which she held in her hand.

"I have given him a dose of this. The strong odor which you noticed just now proceeded from it. He will not recover consciousness for half an hour at least."

"He is not wounded, then?"

"No, no; the revolver was accidentally discharged. But the report may have alarmed some one up stairs. Let us listen."

For a few moments intense silence reigned.

Then the voice of Black Barney was heard at the head of the staircase.

"Chief!"

Tom and his companion remained silent.

"Chief!" repeated Barney.

Then, to our hero's astonishment, the woman replied, in a hoarse, masculine voice, an almost exact imitation of Belden's:

"What is it, Barney?"

"Anything wrong?"

"No."

"Didn't I hear a shot?"

"That's all right; I fired it."

"Good enough."

"Say, Barney?"

"Yes?"

"The woman and the boy will be right up."

"All right."

"I'll follow them shortly. Let them out at once—I've no further use for them."

"Just as you say, chief."

The footsteps of the ruffian were heard retreating.

"Now," whispered the woman to Tom, "help me carry this man into the cell from which I have just rescued you."

Comprehending her meaning, the boy motioned his companion aside and dragged the inanimate form of his late jailer into the dungeon which he himself had so lately occupied.

Madame Larue then closed and locked the door.

"Now," she said, "follow me."

Tom placed his hand upon her arm.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"This is no time for explanations," the woman replied, almost harshly. "Follow me, I tell you."

"But are you not rushing into danger on my account?"

"The danger is past," said Madame Larue. "Come."

Tom followed her in silence along the dark, intricate passage, up the narrow stairway, into the dingy back room, and finally into the saloon.

The place was half filled with customers this time—blear-eyed, wretched-looking specimens of humanity—and Black Barney was too busy in dealing out whisky to them to pay very much attention to Tom and his companion, but he gave them an ugly look, not unmixed with suspicion, as they passed out.

"Now, give me your arm," said Madame Larue when they had reached the street.

In a few moments they had turned into an adjoining thoroughfare, where a cab stood awaiting them.

It was surrounded by a dozen or more urchins, residents of the thickly-populated neighborhood, to whom the sight of a carriage was an unusual thing; and Madame Larue brushed them carelessly aside as she motioned Tom to enter the vehicle.

As he did so his companion uttered a few words

in a low tone to the driver. Then she took her seat by the boy's side, and the carriage started.

A long sigh escaped the woman's lips—a sigh that seemed to be partly of relief, partly of pain. Tom felt that her eyes were fixed upon his face.

"Do not forget this lesson," she said. "You are surrounded by enemies; be constantly on your guard."

"You have saved my life, madam," began the boy.

"I have," replied Madame Larue, "but I may be less fortunate another time. So have a care. Those men asked you a certain question?"

"Yes."

"They asked you to reveal the location of the spot which, in company with your grandmother, Eunice Ordway, you visited on the evening of your twelfth birthday. Am I not right?"

"You are, madam," replied Tom, in surprise.

"I know more than you thought, you see. Your grandmother exacted from you a solemn promise that you would tell the events of that evening to no one, did she not?"

"She did."

"Have you kept that promise?"

Again the boy felt that his companion's eyes were fixed in a penetrating gaze upon his face.

"I have," he replied, unhesitatingly.

"You are certain that you have not given them even a hint of the location of that spot?" persisted the woman.

"I am certain, madam. But why do you ask? Your interest in the matter is as much of a mystery to me as that of the man from whom you have just rescued me."

At this moment the carriage stopped. They had now reached Broadway.

"You will know all in time," replied Madame Larue, half opening the carriage door. "I cannot tell you now; I have much to do before I can reveal the secret. But I tell you again, be on your guard. I shall be near you, but I may not be able to save you."

"You are going to leave me?"

"Yes; the driver will take you wherever you wish to go. Where shall I tell him to set you down?"

Tom gave his employer's address, and Madame Larue repeated it to the driver.

"And now, adieu for the present," she said, a touch of feeling in her voice. "We shall meet again."

"When?" demanded the boy, taking the gloved hand which she extended.

"When my task is accomplished."

"What task?" persisted Tom.

"That question I cannot answer just yet."

"But has it not some connection with the crime of which I was accused—the robbery of my grandmother's money?"

"Yes. But ask me no more. If I succeed, your innocence will be established. If I fail—but I shall not fail. Adieu, once more."

With these words, the woman closed the door of the carriage, and a moment later was lost in the surging crowd.

As the vehicle started again, Tom leaned back, his head in a whirl.

He half believed that his late experience had all been a dream. It seemed more like a chapter from a sensational novel than an episode in real life.

Our hero had yet to learn that truth is stranger than fiction. Events are constantly occurring in our

midst, and are chronicled daily in our great metropolitan journals that rival in strangeness the most extravagant creations of Dumas.

Tom felt that he must make some effort to penetrate the mystery that surrounded him, that he could not passively wait for events to take their course.

He decided that he would confide in his employer, or in his late lawyer, Mr. Whitson, who were the only friends he had in New York.

While he was revolving the matter in his mind, the carriage stopped in front of Mr. Travis' store.

Tom leaped out.

"Do I owe you anything?" he asked the driver.

"No," was the reply; "the lady paid me."

"Do you know that lady's name?" inquired Tom.

"No, sir."

"Don't you know where she lives?"

"I do not," said the man, with a look of surprise. "She hailed me in the street, and got me to take her to the place where you got in. I let her off at the corner where she told me to, and brought you here; and that's all I know about her, sir."

The man was plainly speaking the truth, and Tom questioned him no further, but entered the store, perplexed and bewildered, but as firmly determined as ever to solve the mystery.

CHAPTER XV.

NEW DANGERS.

Algernon Fitz Roy met Tom at the door.

"You take your time, don't you, me boy?" he said, a malicious smile on his lips. "And you're pretty 'igh-toned, too, it seems to me—coming to business in a cab."

"That's my affair, not yours," said Tom, brusquely.

"All right, me boy; you can settle it with the old man, but he's in a 'owling rage, doncherknow."

At this moment Mr. Travis emerged from his private office.

"Did I not tell you to send Ordway to me as soon as he arrived, Fitz Roy?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir; and he's just this minute come, doncherknow, sir."

"Come into my private office, Ordway," said the old gentleman.

Tom followed him in silence.

Mr. Travis closed the door and turned frowningly to the boy.

Although a staunch friend to any one to whom he took a fancy, the old gentleman was a strict disciplinarian in business.

"You have made a poor beginning, Ordway," he said.

"I know it, sir," replied our hero, frankly; "but I could not help it."

"Why could you not?"

In reply Tom briefly detailed his adventures. Mr. Travis listened attentively, and when he had finished said, in a much milder tone than that in which he had first addressed the boy:

"This is a very strange story, Ordway. Do you know where the saloon to which you were taken is located?"

"I do not, sir. It was down near the East River, but I am not familiar with the names of many of the New York streets, and I hardly think I could find it again."

"You should have ascertained its location. However, it's too late for regrets now. Tom, this story deepens the interest I have always felt in you. Perhaps I can help you in this matter; I will do so if I can."

"Thank you, sir."

"But I am too busy just now to talk with you any further. Can you call at my house this evening?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Do so, and I will have a long talk with you. Here is my address;" and he handed Tom a card. "You will have no difficulty in finding the place. Come at about half-past eight."

The old gentleman turned to his papers, signifying that the interview was at an end.

Tom opened the door and entered the outer office. As he did so he saw Fitz Roy sneak away.

It was evident that the Englishman had been eavesdropping; he had almost been caught in the act.

Tom said nothing, but resolved to keep an eye on the fellow in the future.

Fitz Roy had cultivated the habit of tipping since his arrival in this "blawsted kentry," as he called it.

It was his habit to slip out three or four times a day to a saloon several doors below the store, where he usually met a few congenial spirits.

It happened that he visited this place late on the afternoon of the day of which we have been writing.

Among those who greeted him was one Dick Fanshawe, a dissipated-looking young fellow, whose acquaintance he had made a few days before.

"Hello, Fitzzy," cried the youth familiarly; "have one with me."

Fitz Roy did not decline the invitation.

"By the way," said Fanshawe, carelessly, as they emptied their glasses, "you've got a young fellow in your place named Ordway, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"He's just got home from some kind of a racket, hasn't he?"

"Yes; how did you know that?"

"Oh," laughed Fanshawe, "I know more than you'd judge by my looks. Now, Fitzzy, I don't like that fellow."

"Neither do I, doncherknow," replied Fitz Roy, promptly.

"I've got a grudge against him."

"What is it?"

"Never mind that; I've got one—let that suffice. Now, I want to get even with him, and perhaps you can help me."

"How?"

"I'll tell you. But first have another."

When the drinks were disposed of, Fanshawe said: "I want you to tell me all you know, all you can find out about that young fellow; I want you to watch him closely, to listen to what he says, and if you hear anything or see anything worth reporting come to me with it, and you won't lose by it—I can promise you that. Your salary at old Travis' isn't very big, I imagine."

"No, it isn't."

"Perhaps you can double it if you are shrewd. See?"

"You haven't got any grudge against Ordway," said

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SECRET HALF REVEALED.

Fitz Roy, shrewdly. "You're acting as somebody else's agent, ba Jove!"

"You're sharper than I thought you were," said Fanshawe. "Well, suppose I am; does that make any difference to you?"

"Not a bit, deah boy! Keep your affairs to yourself. I'll do what I can for you, and to begin with I'll repeat to you a blawsted conversation that I overheard between Ordway and the old man this very day."

"Go ahead, old chap."

Fitz Roy went ahead, and in a few minutes his companion was in possession of the entire interview that had taken place in Mr. Travis' private office a few hours before.

Fanshawe made no comment, but as soon as Fitz Roy had left the saloon he, too, hurried out, muttering to himself:

"This may be worth repeating to the chief; perhaps it'll give him a pointer."

Before Tom left the office that evening Mr. Travis recommended a boarding-house to him, and he went to it and succeeded in obtaining very good accommodations at a reasonable price.

After dinner, while he was preparing for his visit to Mr. Travis' mansion, he was surprised by a tap upon his door.

In response to his "Come in!" his landlady entered.

"There's a carriage at the door for you, sir," she said, respectfully.

"A carriage!" exclaimed Tom.

"Yes, sir, it's your employer's—Mr. Travis'. He's sent it for you. The coachman gave me this note for you, sir."

Tom tore open the envelope and read as follows:

"My Dear Tom—As the horses happened to be harnessed, and as I fear you may, in your ignorance of the city, and under the peculiar circumstances, make some mistake, I have ordered my coachman to call for you. Come at once, as I have an engagement for the latter part of the evening. Yours,

"HORACE TRAVIS."

Tom hurried down stairs, and a few moments later was seated in the luxuriously appointed carriage on his way up town.

In about fifteen minutes the carriage halted before an imposing-looking mansion. Tom's ring was instantly answered by a colored servant, who ushered him into a magnificently furnished drawing-room.

Scarcely had he seated himself, when a voice from the further end of the dimly-lighted apartment said:

"Good-evening, Ordway; you are prompt."

"Is that you, Mr. Travis?" exclaimed the boy with a start. "I did not see you at first."

"It is I," said the speaker, rising and taking a seat a little nearer his visitor.

"I keep the room darkened on account of my eyes, which, as you know, are peculiarly sensitive. Now, Ordway, I have taken a deep interest in your affairs, and I am going to ask you a few questions, which I hope you will answer frankly."

"I will do so, certainly, sir," replied the boy, little guessing the new dangers that threatened him.

"Your story this afternoon," began Tom's companion, "interested me more than I can tell you. The entire matter seems to me to be one which demands searching investigation. Of course a boy like yourself, alone in a great city, with the ways of which he is unacquainted, cannot do much unaided."

"I suppose that is so, sir."

"Certainly it is. To appeal to the police in such a case is almost a waste of time."

"Why so, Mr. Travis?"

"It would require money and influence to interest them. But explanations on this point are needless; and, as I told you in my note, I am somewhat pressed for time, having an engagement this evening which I forgot when I made the appointment with you. Suffice it to say that there are wheels within wheels, and that the workings of the political machine would be incomprehensible to a boy like you. But I can and will assist you."

"Thank you, sir."

"No thanks are necessary, Tom. I am interested in you, and have been since our first meeting. You saved my daughter's life, and I am glad that I have at last an opportunity to show my appreciation of my indebtedness to you. So much for preliminaries; and now let us get to the point."

"Well, sir?"

"Well, one thing is evident—these scoundrels made you a prisoner solely to gain a certain piece of information from you."

"Yes, sir."

"That information was the exact spot to which your grandmother took you on the evening of your twelfth birthday."

"It was."

"Now, they must attach great importance to this apparently insignificant bit of information. Can you guess why?"

"No, sir, I have not the slightest idea."

"Yet you permitted your life to be imperiled rather than divulge the secret."

"Yes, sir, because I promised my grandmother that I would never tell any one."

"I admire your principle, my boy, but in this case I think you were unwise."

"Why, Mr. Travis?" asked Tom, in surprise.

"Because," was the reply, "the chances are that the secret was not of sufficient importance to justify you in taking so great risks to conceal it."

"The men who captured me thought it worth taking equal risks to gain," said Tom, shrewdly.

"Not quite equal risks; but I appreciate the force of what you say."

"I was on my mettle," continued the boy, "and the more anxiety they showed to learn the secret the more determined I was not to reveal it."

"But do you think your grandmother attached any great importance to this matter?"

"Decidedly she did, sir."

"You are sure of that?"

"Oh, yes."

"Suppose you tell me what passed between you and your grandmother on the subject."

Tom hesitated a moment. Then he said:

"I noticed all that day—my twelfth birthday—that

she seemed unusually quiet and thoughtful. It was at about sunset that she asked me to take a walk with her. 'It is time now,' she said, 'that I reveal to you a secret that I have kept locked up in my breast for many a long year. Guard it carefully and your reward will be great.' I remember the words as distinctly as if I had heard her utter them only yesterday."

"Of course your curiosity was at once aroused?"

"Yes, sir. She then told me to put on my hat and follow her. I did so, and she led me to the spot."

"Well?" said Tom's companion, leaning forward with unconcealed interest.

"Well, sir," went on the boy, "she told me that when she died a document would be found among her effects which would explain to me the reason why she had brought me to that place."

"And was such a document found?"

"Not by me."

"By whom could it have been found?"

"I have thought that it might have been taken by the person who stole my grandmother's money."

"Shrewd boy! Possibly you are right. Well, you promised your grandmother that you would not reveal the location of that spot."

"I did."

"You were, I think, wise not to tell those ruffians who seemed so determined to learn the secret, for there is no knowing what use they would have made of the information. But will you accept a little friendly advice?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Then let me say that I think it is time you told the whole story to some one in whom you place implicit reliance."

Tom made no reply.

"By keeping this secret you may be doing yourself a great wrong. If you were to tell it to some older and more experienced person it might prove to possess a value in their hands which it does not possess in yours."

"But my promise to my grandmother, Mr. Travis?"

"In such matters discretion and common sense should be used. The secret which your grandmother bound you to keep was of value only in connection with the document of which she spoke. That document having disappeared—if, indeed, it ever existed—I think you may fairly consider yourself released from your promise."

Tom shook his head dubiously.

"I have taken an interest in the matter," continued his companion, "because I esteem you, and desire to help you. I may compare our relations to those of lawyer and client. A lawyer, to be of any assistance to the person who employs him, must know all the facts in the case.

"You mean, sir, that——"

"I mean that I would strongly advise you to tell me all."

"To tell you where the spot which I visited with my grandmother that night is?"

"Exactly."

Tom hesitated.

There seemed to be much justice in what his employer said, yet he found it difficult to make up his mind to break the promise, which he regarded almost superstitiously.

But he did not want to offend Mr. Travis, whom he held in the highest esteem, and whose friendship

would probably be in the future, as it had in the past, of value to him.

There was an awkward silence, which the boy's companion presently broke.

"Do as you like, Ordway," he said, almost petulantly. "Of course I have no personal interest whatever in the matter. And I must remind you that my time is precious."

This decided Tom to confide in his employer.

"I will tell you the whole story, sir," he said.

"Very well, go on."

"You know all, except——"

"Except the location of this mysterious spot which you visited with your grandmother."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, well, proceed," and there was a ring of impatience in the man's voice.

"There is a lonely spot about a quarter of a mile from my grandmother's home called Adams' Acre."

"I've heard of the place," interrupted Tom's companion. "It is an uncultivated, barren tract of ground, and has the reputation of being haunted."

"Yes, sir. A man named Adams was murdered there many years ago, and it is said that his spirit haunts the spot."

"I've heard that story, too. Well, go on, go on!"

"My grandmother took me to Adams' Acre—I remember that I was somewhat afraid to go on account of the reputation the place had. In the centre of the Acre stands an old oak tree. She led me to its foot and said——"

At this moment an unexpected interruption occurred.

A man suddenly entered the room, apparently in some excitement, exclaiming:

"Chief, can I see you a moment?"

"Curse you, you fool!" cried Tom's companion, losing control of himself, "did I not give orders——"

He paused suddenly.

Tom sprang to his feet and turned on the gas. Then, as he faced the man with whom he had been conversing, an exclamation of amazement and consternation burst from his lips.

"You are not Mr. Travis!"

CHAPTER XVII.

MORE FOUL PLAY.

Not once during their interview had Tom Ordway suspected that the man with whom he was conversing was not his employer.

The dim light, aided by a careful "make-up" and an exact imitation of Mr. Travis' voice, had produced an illusion that would have deceived an older and shrewder person than our hero.

Tom had been made the victim of a clever trick, which had been exposed just in the nick of time.

The baffled villain stood before him, his face convulsed with rage, and bearing very little resemblance to that of Mr. Travis.

The man who had unwittingly exposed the plot slunk out of the room.

For a few moments there was silence.

Both Tom and his companion stood staring at each other, then the boy turned to leave the room.

"Hold!" cried his companion, "I'm not done with you yet."

"But I'm done with you—for the present," said Tom, as he entered the hall and stepped toward the front door.

"Stop him!" shouted the chief, at the same time rushing forward himself.

A man sprang from a door on the other side of the hall and blocked his way.

But Tom, by a dexterous movement, which he had used on some previous occasions to advantage, tripped him up. As he fell he struck his head with considerable force against an iron hat-rack.

The blow evidently robbed him of consciousness, for he lay motionless.

In another moment Tom had opened the door and rushed out into the street.

Without stopping to look behind him he ran down the dark and deserted thoroughfare at a good rate of speed.

He heard his late companion's footsteps in close pursuit, and he increased his speed.

He felt that in this case discretion would prove the better part of valor.

When he turned into Lexington avenue his pursuer was but a few yards behind him.

But he had scarcely entered that thoroughfare when he darted into a dark area, where he remained motionless, almost breathless.

The stratagem was successful. His pursuer darted past at the top of his speed.

When his footsteps began to die away in the distance our hero left the area and made the best of his way to Third avenue, first, however, assuring himself of the location of the house to which he had been enticed.

Then it occurred to him that, although it was now late in the evening, it would be wise for him to go at once to Mr. Travis and inform him of what had occurred.

He hunted up his employer's true residence in the directory, and found that it was several streets further up town than the dwelling from which he had just escaped.

A few minutes' walk brought him to the house.

"Are you the young man who was going to call and see Mr. Travis this evening?" asked the servant who opened the door.

Tom explained that he was, and that he had been unavoidably detained.

"Mr. Travis waited for you a while," explained the man, with an air of some asperity, "but he had to go out."

Just then Miss Florence, the merchant's daughter, suddenly appeared upon the scene.

"Is that you, Tom—I mean Mr. Ordway?" she exclaimed, blushing. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you."

And she extended her hand, which the boy took with considerable timidity.

"Come right in," she continued. "I have lots of things to tell you and to ask you."

"But since Mr. Travis is not in——" began Tom, with a good deal of diffidence.

"Oh, that makes no difference," laughed the girl. "I want to have a little talk with you myself."

And she skipped gayly into a little reception-room

near the door, beckoning to Tom to follow, which he did, though not without some hesitation.

Our hero was not exactly bashful or awkward, but he shrank from appearing to take the slightest advantage of the kindness shown him by Mr. Travis or his daughter.

They were his social superiors, and he felt that it was almost presumptuous in him to seat himself in the luxuriously-furnished reception-room and converse with the young girl on an equal footing.

And perhaps this feeling was deepened by the haughty demeanor of the "flunky," who stared at him with lifted eyebrows and an expression of undisguised astonishment as he entered the room.

"Papa has told me your romantic story," began Miss Florence, when they were seated, "and I am just dying to hear more of it from your lips. Why, it sounds like a sensational romance! I never expected to become acquainted with such a hero outside of the pages of a book."

"A hero!" laughed Tom, the girl's manner putting him at ease at once. "I'm afraid there isn't anything very heroic about me, Miss Travis."

"Yes, there is, too," said the young girl, with a pretty pout. "I think you are very ungallant to contradict a lady. But why didn't you come earlier? Papa came to the conclusion that you had been detained unexpectedly, and went out."

"I was detained," said Tom, "and in a very singular manner."

"More romance?" cried Miss Florence. "Oh, tell me all about it."

So Tom told her the whole story. She listened with breathless interest, and when he had finished, exclaimed:

"And after that you disclaim being a hero of romance! I've no doubt that you have had lots of other extraordinary adventures that I've never heard. You must come to dinner with papa some day as soon as we get back and entertain us with the story of your life, like one of the characters in the Arabian Nights."

"You are going away, Miss Travis?" questioned Tom.

"Why, yes; didn't you know it? Papa has been contemplating a trip to Aspinwall for some time—you know he has an agency there—and has been promising to take me with him. To-day he decided quite suddenly to go at once on account of some important business, and we sail to-morrow. That's one reason why I am so sorry you did not see him to-night. But, perhaps, if you wait a while, he will come in. I will try to entertain you in the meanwhile."

She did try, and she succeeded so admirably that Tom remained nearly an hour.

But Mr. Travis did not return, and Tom at last felt obliged to "tear himself away," despite Miss Florence's urgent appeal that he would remain "just a few minutes longer."

When he left the house it was raining heavily, and he hurried toward Third avenue, where he intended to take a car.

He did not observe that he was followed by two men. Had he seen them he would have recognized one of them as the "Chief" and the other as the man whom he had tripped up in the house which he had visited in the early part of the evening.

The two had been loitering about outside Mr. Travis' mansion for some time.

"Well, Morrill," said the chief as Tom appeared, "you see I was right."

"Yes."

"I knew the boy would come here. Now, then, he must be put out of the way. We know his secret and—what is of equal importance to us—he has an inkling of ours. I know that I can trust you."

"Have no fears, chief; I'll make a sure job of it, and will leave no traces of my work."

"I know it. I will leave you now. Follow him; when all is over report to me."

"Good enough."

The chief turned into a side street, while Morrill continued to follow Tom, who was now half a block ahead.

A few minutes later the boy heard a quick footstep behind him. He was about to turn when he received a blow upon the right temple which felled him to the sidewalk, where he lay unconscious.

When he recovered his senses intense darkness surrounded him. As he staggered to his feet a variety of unaccustomed sounds met his ears.

In a moment he comprehended his position. He was in the hold of a vessel which was making ready for sea!

CHAPTER XVIII.

A STARTLING INTERRUPTION.

Adams' Acre was one of the loneliest spots imaginable.

It was situated at some distance from the highway and was bounded on three sides by a thick growth of wood and on the other by a precipice.

In the early part of the present century a man had been murdered while taking a short cut across the Acre, and ever since that time the more superstitious of the residents of Marbleville had believed the place haunted.

It was claimed that strange sights had been seen and strange sounds heard in the Acre; and though—as in most such cases—it would have been difficult to find exactly who had seen or heard these ghastly manifestations, the stories were generally believed.

Of course they increased in impressiveness and in wealth of detail as the years rolled by, and at the time of our story it would have been hard to find one of the villagers who would have been willing to visit the spot after nightfall.

And never had the Acre looked more dismal and ghastly than on the night of which we are writing—that succeeding the events detailed in our last chapter.

It was a cool, breezy night, and an army of dark clouds were hurrying through the heavens, sometimes veiling the face of the moon for ten minutes at a time, and then permitting her rays to illumine the deserted spot and evoke shadows that made it look even less inviting than when enshrouded in partial gloom.

If any of the superstitious residents of Marbleville had been within sight of Adams' Acre at about ten o'clock on the evening of which we write, they would have been amazed to see two men, each supplied with

a spade and other tools, emerge from the woods on the western side of the tract and gaze around them.

"Yes, Morrill," said one of them, "this is the spot. And see! yonder is the oak tree of which the boy spoke."

"Yes, chief," was the response, "but you must remember that he didn't finish his story."

"True, but I am certain that he was about to say that the old woman told him to dig at the foot of that oak. Oh, there can be no doubt of it!"

"Well, we shall soon know."

They paused at the foot of the oak.

"Now to work," said the chief; "and if I mistake not we shall be richly rewarded for our labors."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A loud, shrill, prolonged laugh sounded on the still night air, a laugh that seemed to be a derisive response to the words of the chief.

An exclamation of fear escaped the lips of Morrill and the spade dropped from his grasp. Even the chief started.

"What was that?" gasped the former.

"I don't know."

"Where did the sound come from?"

"I could not place it."

"Nor I. By Jove! perhaps the place is haunted."

"Bah! don't be a fool!" responded the chief.

"I'm not; but there's something mighty queer about that."

"What do you suppose it was—a ghost?"

"Perhaps."

"Fool! All that I'm afraid of is that we have been followed to this place. But pshaw! that cannot be. Well, the treasure is almost in my grasp, and neither man nor devil shall rob me of it. Come, don't stand there trembling! Pick up your spade and get to work."

Morrill obeyed and followed the example of his companion, who had already commenced digging.

But scarcely had he turned up a spadeful of earth when the same strange, shrill laugh again rung in their ears.

Morrill threw down his spade in a panic.

"Let us get away from this, chief," he said. "I don't like this job—I'll have no more of it—no more of it, I tell you."

The chief drew a revolver, and springing upon his companion, pressed it to his forehead.

"You hound!" he hissed, "desert me now, and your life shall pay the penalty. You know I always mean what I say."

"But, chief——" began the fellow.

"I never suspected you of being a coward, or you would not have accompanied me on this trip," went on the chief.

"I am afraid of no man alive," faltered Morrill.

"Are you, then, afraid of a dead man—a shadow?" returned his companion. "Here, take a swallow of this"—handing him a flask—"it'll put a little life into you. That's it! Now, then, pick up that spade again and get to work."

Morrill obeyed in silence.

In a few minutes a hole, perhaps three feet deep, had been dug. Then the chief's spade touched a metallic substance.

"Aha!" he exclaimed, in some excitement, "we have it at last. Did you hear that, Morrill?"

"Yes. What was it?"

"The lid of a box, I think. Yes, a square iron box. Help me lift it out, Morrill."

The fellow obeyed, and the box, which was about a foot and a half square—lay upon the ground by their side.

"Now to force the lock," muttered the chief. "Why," he exclaimed, a moment later, "the box is not locked. What does this mean?"

He threw open the lid.

"Empty!" exclaimed Morrill.

The chief uttered a bitter curse.

The next moment that strange laugh again rung out on the still night air.

Then a tall, shadowy form seemed to rise out of the very ground at their feet.

Morrill started back with a cry of horror.

"Eunice Ordway!" gasped the chief. "Do the dead return to life?"

The further incidents in this great story will be found in the companion tale, entitled, "THE MARBLEVILLE MYSTERY SOLVED; OR, BROUGHT TO JUSTICE," which will be published in No. 802 of the Old Cap. Collier Library, out week after next.

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